VISIT…

conversations with

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

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CONVERSATIONS WITH MOHSEN MAKHMALBAF

HAMID DABASHI

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ONCE UPON A TIME A FILMMAKER

Born in Tehran in 1957 to a staunchly religious family, Mohsen Ostad Ali Makhmalbaf grew up in southern Tehran and spent his early childhood in the loving care of his maternal grandmother and aunt while his mother, divorced by his father, worked as a nurse. He grew up in a religiously and politically charged atmosphere in the 1960s and the June 1963 uprising of Ayatollah Khomeini constitutes one of his earliest memories. Chiefly responsible for his early politicization was his stepfather, a religiously devout and politically active supporter of Khomeini whom his mother married soon after Makhmalbaf was born. In 1972, Makhmalbaf formed his own urban guerrilla group and, in 1974, he attacked a police officer, was arrested and put in jail. There he remained until 1978, when the revolutionary wave led by Ayatollah Khomeini freed him and launched his literary and cinematic career.

Tobeh-ye Nasuh (Nasuh's Repentance, *1982*), Este'zah (Seeking Refuge, *1983*) *and* Do Cheshm-e Bisu (Two Sightless Eyes, *1983*) *were his first attempts at filmmaking. By the late 1980s, these early attempts begin to yield to more fruitful and mature engagements with cinema.* Bycote (*1985*), Dastforush (The Peddler, *1986*) *and* Bicycle-ran (The Cyclist, *1987*) *reflect a more serious awareness of the nature and function of cinema. With* Nobat-e Asheghi (A Time for Love, *1990*), Shab-ha-ye Zayandeh-rud (Zayandeh-Rud Nights, *1990*), Nasered-din Shah, Actor-e Cinema (Once Upon a Time, Cinema, *1991*) *and* Honarpisheh (The Actor, *1992*), *Makhmalbaf enters the most serious stage of his film career. A major contender along the earlier masters of the Iranian cinema, he could no longer be dismissed as a committed ideologue of the Islamic Republic. Cinema had transformed him. By the late 1990s, Makhmalbaf's global reputation as one of the finest filmmakers ever was indisputable.* Salaam Cinema (*1994*), Nun va Goldun (A Moment of Innocence, *1995*) *and* Gabbeh (*1995*) *became the trademark of an Iranian cinema that was now the common staple of major film festivals all over the world.* Sokut (Silence, *1998*) *and* Dar (The Door, *1999*), *a short episode in a collection of short films in and about the small island of Kish in the Persian Gulf, are Makhmalbaf's latest works.*

The following is an edited version of a long conversation with Mohsen Makhmalbaf conducted in October 1996, when he

was visiting New York during the screening of Gabbeh *at the New York Film Festival. The conversation took place at the residence of a mutual friend, Bahman Maqsudlu, and was subsequently transcribed and translated by Kamran Rastegar.*

We began with a review of a three-volume collection of Makhmalbaf's writings, Gong-e Khabdideh (The Dumb Man's Dream). *By way of a general introduction to his film and fiction, I asked Makhmalbaf to go over these volumes and tell me what they contain.*

HAMID DABASHI. *Tell me more about these three volumes you have just published.*

MOHSEN MAKHMALBAF. The first volume, *Gong-e Khabdideh* (*The Dumb Man's Dream*), is a selection of stories. There are five stories in it: '*Mahbube-ha-ye Shab*' ('Sweet Darlings at Night'), '*Mara Be-bus*' ('Kiss Me'), '*Jarrahi-e Ruh*' ('Surgery of the Soul'), '*Hoz-e Soltun*' ('Hoz-e Soltun') and '*Bagh-e Bolur*' ('The Crystal Garden'). They make up more than 400 pages, which is about 45 per cent of my published stories.

You mean that 55 per cent of them are not represented here at all?

That's right. These are various examples, mostly dark in their spirit. With the exception of the first two, which are

a little delicate, the third is an incredibly dark story, and the fourth and fifth stories—'*Hoz-e Soltun*' and '*Bagh-e Bolur*'—both concern women. '*Hoz-e Soltun*' is about women before the revolution, and '*Bagh-e Bolur*' is about women after the revolution.

The second volume is a selection of my screenplays and writings for the stage. The plays, I imagine, make up about a thousand pages, of which only 30 had been previously published—only one play, *Marg-e Digari* (*The Death of Another*), from which Mohammad Reza Honarmand made a 16-mm film which has been shown on television. It's a good work; I hope that you'll be able to see it some time.

Have you ever directed any of these plays yourself?

My plays? No.

None of them?

That's right.

You only wrote them, and others directed them?

Yes. Many of them have been produced, if not all. I'd say that each of my plays has been performed in 40–50 towns and cities across Iran.

And these are works from what years, your plays?

These are also from the 1980s and early 1990s.

Do they coincide with your film works?

No, they precede my film works. Although some of my plays did provide the basis for my screenplays. *Shishomin Nafar* (*The Sixth Person*) became the film *Este'zah* (*Seeking Refuge*). *Valeh* (*Bewitched*) became the film *Baykot* (*Boycott*). *Zangha* (*The Tolls*) is another screenplay that was made by someone else into a film. *Boycott* was the most popular film that year [1987] and *The Tolls* was the second most popular.

Who directed that?

The same filmmaker I mentioned, Mohammad Reza Honarmand, who made the film based on my play *The Death of Another*.

They didn't let me direct *Madreseh-ye Raja'i* (*The Raja'i School*) myself, so a person by the name of Karim Zargar, the head of the Audio-Visual College, directed it. But it ended up rather a weak film, although on the whole not so bad. *Bacheh-ye Khoshbakht* (*The Lucky Child*) was based upon an Alberto Moravia work but the screenplay was written by me, and it became the first episode of my film *Dastforush* (*The Peddler*). *Tavalod-e Yek Pirezan* (*The Birth of an Old Woman*) became the second episode, and

the screenplay *The Peddler* became the third. *Comedi-ye Ehtezar* (*The Comedy of Death*) is a short and very dark screenplay which was not permitted to be made. *Bicycle-ran* (*The Cyclist*) is, of course, the screenplay for the film of the same name. *Farmandar* (*The Governor*) became a film directed by Morteza Masaeli. This turned out to be a mediocre film which was subjected to censorship; parts of it were changed, and the end result was worthless. *Moftabad* (*Gooodfornothingville*), *Garmazadeh* (*Heat-Stricken*), *Nazar-e Aghnia* (*The Point of View of the Rich*) have never been produced, and the same goes for *Seh Tableau* (*Three Tableaux*) and *Fazilat-e Bismillah* (*The Virtue of 'In The Name of God'*). *Nobat-e Asheghi* (*A Time for Love*) is the screenplay for the film of the same name. Nun va Goldoon (*A Moment of Innocence*) has not been produced. Nor has *Khab-e Bi Ta'bir* (*A Dream with No Interpretation*). *Mard-e Na Tamam* (*The Unfinished Man*) was made by [Moharram] Zaynal-Zadeh, the same actor who played the lead role in *The Cyclist*. *Nasered-din Shah, Actor-e Cinema* (*Once Upon a Time, Cinema*) is the same as the film, as is *Honarpisheh* (*The Actor*), and the more recent screenplays are not included here since this collection only covers the '80s.

Let's look at the third volume: it's probably more of use to you as it's a collection of my essays. It has '*Ghesseh Chist*' ('What Is a Story?') and '*Honar Hame-ye Honar Ast*'

('Art Is All of Art'). If we put that first one aside, the other three—'Art Is All of Art', '*Cinema Hame-ye Cinema Ast*' ('Cinema Is All of Cinema') and '*Realism Hame-ye Realism Ast*' ('Realism Is All of Realism')—all deal with the question of relativism.

How is that?

They're an outline of the relation of art, cinema and realism to the question of relativism.

The other two are more technical: 'What Is a Story?', which also to an extent deals with relativism, and how it is impossible to arrive at description since description can only apply to that which is dead. So when the subject is living and ever-changing, how can we define its limits?; and '*Monhani-ye Keshesh dar Film*' ('The Arc of Attraction in Film') is a mathematical discussion concerning the incorporation of certain principles into the production of a good solid screenplay that will sell. I've done it this way two or three times myself, and thought: 'Well, now I want to make one that sells' and so I used this method, and—

And it was successful?

Yes, it was. It's practically fail-safe. It's an interesting article, something that could have some application in university courses, for example in screenplay-writing classes.

I don't think that anyone anywhere has written anything of this sort, and it might actually gain something in translation. And I think it's more of use to Hollywood than—

How do you mean?

I wrote it at a time when I was making art films and people said: 'It won't sell'. So I decided to write something to tell them: 'See, I can make films that sell, and I can tell you how to do it.'

But this would have no application in the pursuit of making art films, would it?

In some sense, certainly, you can use these principles and adapt them to making an art film. You can say: 'I want to make a film that will sell in Iran' or: 'I want a film with a world market.' But the question is: how to devise a method? Which is to say, this is the sort of thing that is well-suited for film production companies. And the essay's been printed several times in various places.

In any case, next [in the book] comes '*Gozide-ye Naqd va Barressi-ye Film*' ('Selected Film Criticism'). It begins with *Seeking Refuge* and goes through *Once Upon a Time*, *Cinema*, *Boycott*, *The Peddler*, *The Cyclist*, *Arusi-ye Khuban* (*Marriage of the Blessed*), *A Time for Love*, *Shabhaye Zayendeh-rood* (*Zayendeh-rood Nights*). You can also find dis-

cussions concerning *Tobeh-ye Nasuh* (*Nasuh's Repentance*) and *Do Cheshm-e Bisu* (*Two Sightless Eyes*). These articles embrace my views and beliefs. And in discussing my films, this section really should be of use to you, especially this interview with me which I still think is really the most important I've ever given. *Sorush* [magazine] conducted the interview over a span of five hours, and it was published as an edition containing only this interview—the only interview in the history of Iran for which an issue of a major magazine was reprinted because of the demand for it. And much of the controversy over my work began with this interview, although in this book it is greatly edited and condensed. In the interview, I discuss [Bahram] Beiza'i. I gave my opinion there on just about everything: the government, propaganda, the Left, the Right, the moderates, I spoke of everything rather quickly. For example, speaking of Beiza'i, I said that this person has no ideals, he only criticizes; for him everything is bad but he never tells us what is good. I also said that we should be very grateful to Kiarostami who at least asks: 'Where is the friend's house?' And nowadays, lots of people say: 'How could you say that Beiza'i should be executed?!' and I always respond: 'You fool! When have I ever said that Beiza'i should be executed!?'

Should be executed?!

Yes! And I say: 'What are these words you put in my mouth? I mean, now with something that has been published and distributed, how dare you attribute something like that to me!' But I still will say, Beiza'i is ideal-less—he has no vision for improving the world, not like Sepehri does. He simply has no vision.

How could 'has no vision' be turned into 'ought to be executed'?

Well, that's just it. Things get twisted around. Now, the original of the interview is only published in the magazine, and all of this is there. The version in this book is edited and only has the discussions from that interview which concern more technical issues. But if you get your hands on that magazine, you'll get a good range of my opinions. What's interesting is that my beliefs have not changed, really, since then, and I don't much differ from the person I was then. His tone was sharp, certainly. For example, consider the question there about Kimia'i: I had called him a person who has been defeated, and who tries, in vain, to associate himself with this or that nonsense . . . and I still feel the same way. I just don't like his work! Again, that is why I've said that we should thank God for Kiarostami. Perhaps the only thing I've changed my mind about is Amir Naderi's film *Davandeh* (*The Runner*). I had said that *Sazdahani* (*The Harmonica*) is better than *The Runner*, and now I feel that *The Runner* is

better than *The Harmonica*. But that isn't strange. Sometimes, I feel people expect me to give my final views on everything. But if I did, then what would I live the rest of my life for?

So, this interview is important, in that it exposes my views concerning cinema.

Going back to the book, there is also, though somewhat edited, a series of critical essays concerning my films. And, here again, there is an important article: 'Director's Notes on *A Time for Love*'. If I were to recommend you to read two things concerning my work, one would have to be the interview for *The Peddler*, and the other would be my 'Notes on *A Time for Love*'. These two represent my present views.

And then about *Zayendeh-rood Nights*. The book contains a summary of the six months' worth of insults published in Iranian newspapers concerning that film. And I was never permitted to defend myself against them. There are about 30 pages of insults written about me here, from the random statement from [the daily newspaper] *Keyhan* to everything else. There were even demands for my execution.

To the Manner Born

You were born in 1957. Correct?

Yes.

It is now 1996.

I was born on 28 May 1957.

Therefore, your life so far encompasses about five decades of the modern history of Iran. Do you divide your life into eras? If so, what eras or periods do you divide it into?

Well, I'll say a general thing concerning my biography first. My grandfather is from Kashan, and had eight sons and two daughters. His sons all took several wives, and each have several offspring from each wife. So, when I was released from prison after the revolution, I had 156 or 157 cousins. All of whom were, with a few exceptions, total strangers to me. Because my own mother was only one of my father's wives and they had separated after six days, we had no contact with my father's family.

Your mother was married for only six days?

Yes. I'll tell you about it in a minute. I just wanted to say that from my father's side I have roots in Kashan. My grandfather was a baker, and he had an uncle called Seyyed Sagha. His story is unravelled in *Nun va Goldoon*

(*A Moment of Innocence*) and '*Hoz-e Soltun*'. And on my mother's side, my grandmother was the wife of a gravedigger in Tehran who later became a mason. They had three daughters and a son. So, from my mother's side I'm Tehrani, and from my father's Kashani.

My mother was first married at the age of 12 to a man of 27 or 28, a family member. After three or four years, and having had two children, they separated. My mother went on to study, became a nurse, a teacher. She was a nurse in the operating theatre, and lived her life—

What about your siblings?

An older sister and a brother. So, my father becomes acquainted with my mother. He had a wife, from whom he'd had two daughters. Not having a son, he made some excuse about wanting one even though he'd actually fallen in love with my mother.

Where did this all happen?

They were more or less living in the same district. But my father was illiterate—

And your mother was living alone with two children?

No, the two children were with their father. So my father comes along and marries my mother. After six days, his

first wife comes, grabs him by the ear and takes him back. And so the story ends. I'm the outcome of those six days. [*Laughs*] If my father hadn't fallen in love, and they hadn't spent those six days together—well, who knows what would have happened to Islam and blasphemy . . . After I was born, I lived with my mother . . . and my mother would go to work every day . . . Some of these discussions are in the book *The Dumb Man's Dream*.

In any case, after my birth, I was looked after by my grandmother. My mother worked nights in the operating theatre at the hospital. She paid our bills. My father refused to get a birth certificate for me, and the two of them fell into all sorts of petty games of humiliating and holding grudges against each other—

With your mother?

With my mother.

Their love was over?

Well, yes, it was the sort of love that ended. My mother paid our bills until she was suddenly dismissed. She got into an argument with the hospital administrator, and he cancelled her nursing certification. She could no longer work as a nurse, just because he made a pen mark across her certification card. She couldn't even get a job anywhere else. Because of this situation she was forced to file

a complaint and try to get child support from my father. When she went to make the complaint, she had him arrested naked—wearing only a loincloth—and had him taken to the police station. This episode humiliated my father [*laughs*] and he decided to kidnap me, since my mother refused to let him be my guardian. I'd only seen my father once or twice—I only knew that he was really fat—and so I grew afraid of him. And at this point, he decided to kidnap me.

How old were you when this was going on?

I was about five. My dad hired a thug to wait at the head of the alley, paid his wages for two years to look out and kidnap me if I should ever venture out of the house and into the street. So I spent two years in jail—right there in my own house [*laughs*]. I had an aunt who was a schoolteacher. She lived with us and loved me quite a lot. She taught me to read and write. Before I even went to the first grade I was already reading detective stories.

Do you remember which ones?

Oh sure—all of Amir Ashiri's work, and others like it. The family who rented our home to us had a son who was about five years older than me. He had a whole collection from which he'd rent books to me for a *gherun* [a penny] a day. So any day I'd find myself with a *gherun* in my

pocket, I'd go and rent a novel. I'd read the whole thing right away so that the charge didn't become two *gheruns* [*laughs*]. I think for about two years I just continually read . . .

You just read Amir Ashiri?

Any book I could rent for a *gherun* a day, I'd read.

People like Amir Ashiri, Arvanaqi Kermani, Parviz Qazi Sa'id?

Yes, all of those, and the magazine *Dokhtaran Pesaran* ['Girls and Boys'].

Did you ever read Mickey Spillane?

No.

How about Sherlock Holmes?

No. I mostly remember *Dokhtaran Pesaran, Keyhan Bacheha* ['Children's Keyhan']. And Amir Ashiri, and Qazi Sa'id . . . Books like that.

Yes, I remember them very well.

How long have you been out of Iran?

About 20 years.

But your Persian is really good.

Yours isn't bad either.

[*Laughs*] I told you in Locarno—you confuse me.

Good. Confusion is good for you. Now, how old were you at this time?

Those belong to the period before and during my going to first and second grade. So, on one side, my aunt taught me reading and writing, and on the other, my grandmother took me to the mosque with her.

This was your younger aunt?

Yes, my younger aunt.

Was she married?

No, this was because she hadn't yet married.

So she was a fairly young woman then?

Yes. You see my grandmother, mother and aunt, we all lived together then. My aunt taught me to read and write, and my grandmother, since she couldn't just leave me at home alone, would take me with her to the mosque.

I became first a *mokkaber* [one who says 'Allah-u Akbar' to alert people who are praying to change their ritual positions], then a *mo'azen* [one who recites the call to prayer before every fixed time for prayer] at the mosque.

Your grandmother would go to the mosque every day?

Every morning, noon and night, and I would follow.

And the mosque—where was it?

Up the alley, just at the edge of Meydan-e Shush. Near the bus station.

Near Darvazeh Ghar?

How do you know these places? No, on this side of Darvazeh Ghar. If you were to go to Meydan-e Shush and—

Near the train tracks?

No, Darvazeh Ghar was next to the train tracks. This was on the other side.

Opposite?

Yes, exactly opposite.

I see now.

My mother had met this lawyer while dealing with our legal problems. A young man, recently come from Qom, a follower of Khomeini, a religious and political person. And she married him. My father had the effect of scaring me, driving me from the life of the alley which was more or less the real world and trapping me in a house where

three important people tried to take care of me. One was my grandmother, who introduced me to religion. One was my aunt, who made me literate. The last was my stepfather, who made me political. My character was thus in the first three decades of my life moulded by these three. All of the later events of my life were consequences of these relationships.

And your stepfather, what was his name?

Kamalian.

Kamalian. But you chose to keep your original name?

Well, this is Iran, after all.

Yes.

Until the age of 15—I was 17 when I was arrested—I'd probably seen my father 14 or 15 times altogether. Once every year or two, for no more than a minute or two at a time. Later, when I was in jail, he never came to visit. After I was released, my son, Meytham, then four or five years old, demanded to see his grandfather. I tried to see him but was unable to. Two years before he passed away, once, I saw him in passing. He'd got diabetes and lost a lot of weight. He completely denied our relationship. Imagine, two years before his death, even after I'd made *The Peddler* and *The Cyclist*—well, I'd made *The Peddler*, not

The Cyclist—he still had no idea what I did for a living. He said: 'I hear you work in a tobacconist's!' [*Laughs*] He really had no idea. And he didn't care what or who I was. He was the father of a child who had come from a six-day marriage.

Was he not at all political?

My father? No. He ran a public bath. He was illiterate. [*Pause*] It's funny—when I see myself in the mirror these days, I find my appearance has come to resemble his quite a lot.

But you said he was obese!

Oh yes, but I mean my face. Yes, he was very overweight but eventually grew thin. So much for my father. As for my mother—she married three times. First, as a child: she was 12 and she married a man of 28 and she separated after two or three years and began to work. Second: to my father, which lasted for six days. Then, later, to her third husband who was a very good person. If you read '*Hoz-e Soltun*', there is a mosque attendant whose character I based to a great extent on my stepfather.

Were you very close?

Very. My politicization occurred entirely under his influence.

And his political beliefs—what were they exactly?

The continuation of Khomeini's uprising in 1963. He was a follower of Khomeini.

And was he in contact with people in Najaf or Khomeini or anyone else?

Well, he wasn't . . . he was only a supporter, that's all.

What I mean is did he support the cause financially, for example?

Yes. However, after the revolution, he reversed himself. We had our disagreements then. The same person who had politicized me during the revolution, one year after the revolution was saying: 'I no longer accept these people.' [*Laughs*]

While you still did?

I still did.

And you disagreed, politically, at that time.

We were not on speaking terms then. But now—

This is after you were released from prison.

You see, the fact that I went to jail, my political and ideological constitution, all have their roots in my stepfather. If I have been a religious person, its roots can be traced

to my grandmother. My grandmother was a very interesting character. She was incredibly kind. I think that the greatest love of my life has been my grandmother, because at the very time when I was most afraid that my father would kidnap me, and I was caught up in this madness, when I slept beside her I felt more secure than any place in the universe. All the stories she told me at night, all the bedtime stories, were tales of the prophets. In these conditions, the tales of the prophets would give me such peace of mind that I would feel practically invisible to the world. My grandmother was so kind that God and my grandmother merged into one in her stories. When I think of God, I think that this is still the case . . . The God that rests in the depths of my heart looks like my grandmother. When I was younger, there was a cabinet in our house and in it was a picture of my grandfather wearing a hat. I used to think that God was an old man. But later, God became an old woman. The affection my grandmother used to show me, and her religious talk, at that age . . .

Other than the stories of the prophets, what else would she tell you?

Those are what she spoke most of during the period I would go to the mosque with her. I went to the mosque

with her for years, played with the other children. I grew up in the mosque. Imagine, a hundred clerics in the mosque, and whatever they spoke of, of *fiqh* [jurisprudence] and *irfan* [mysticism] and history—it all settled in my mind. To the extent that my first dream was to become a cleric. In fifth grade I took the test, in sixth grade I took the test and was moved ahead to the seventh. After the third term of the seventh grade, when I was to take the high school entrance exams, I actually left the public schools and became a seminarian for two terms. I even began to study the—

You were a seminarian in Tehran?

First in Tehran, then in Qom. I attended the Feyziyeh Seminary.

What year were you at the Feyziyeh?

I'd have to work out the year. Let's see, I was born in 1957—

If we take 1957 and add the seven years of school, it'd be '64, correct?

And put another six years onto it—

That'd be '70.

And another two years, and that would be '72.

So in 1972 you left school to become a seminarian?

That sounds right. I was in school for seven years, then spent two years as a seminarian—

First in Tehran, then at Feyziyeh—

Yes, but maybe this was earlier, say '70, since I returned to public school afterwards, high school, for two years, then worked for two years in different places. By then I was only 17. If I was 17 in '74, then I was working from '72 to '74 in 13 different places as an apprentice; from '70 to '74 I was in high school; and between '68 and '70 I was a *talabeh* [seminarian].

When you went to Feyziyeh, as a boy, where did you live?

I had a couple of friends, a bit older than me, from the neighbourhood mosque who had gone there. One was called Foumini, the son of the same Ayatollah Foumini who was killed by Reza Shah. I stayed with him.

It was under the influence of these three people that these things happened. My aunt's influence was mostly of an artistic nature. Since I read those books so well . . . I've just decided that my younger daughter, Hana—she just finished the second grade—is not to return to school. I'm only having her study the Persian language . . . because it's just that ability to read. Because my Persian was good,

it gave me the opportunity to pick up any book and read it and understand it. So what has stayed with me the most is the influence of that aunt.

Precociously Political

And you feel that now you've sort of put your grandmother and stepfather behind you?

Yes, the combination of their influences led me to jail, and to the political and religious concerns I was filled with. But that which has remained with me, and is with me now, is the influence of that aunt . . .

After leaving school, I worked a while. Remember, that this is the period of armed rebellion, and all three of those personalities had taken shape within me. Now, I was writing plays. So when we formed an armed resistance group—all of us aged 15 to 17—we named it 'Balal-e Habashi', based on the title of my play '*Balal-e Habasheh*' whose protagonist was constantly under torture. Our aim was to increase the presence of political resistance. I remember that [Ali] Shari'ati was active at that same time, as were the Mojahedin-e Khalq and the Cherikha-ye Fada'i—all in that period. Slowly, from the mosques, a religious movement was also brewing. Some were arguing for rebellion against the government, another group—

You're now 13 or 15 years old?

Exactly, that's the age when I began to pursue artistic work. And when Shari'ati was first having his influence.

Where did you first hear of him?

He was being mentioned in our mosque, and there's an interesting story connected with that. When I returned from studying in Qom, I thought to myself that it would be impossible to go like this to Palestine; that, instead, I should do cultural work. So I began to establish a bookstore with a friend of mine, and I collected, in that time's currency, 100,000 Tomans' [close to $15,000 with the rate of exchange at the time] worth of books for free. In those days, you could buy a house for 20,000 Tomans. I would stop by bookstores, introduce myself—give my card and say that I'd just started a library—and I'd often be given a free book by the owner. Imagine, how many bookstores I visited! I would write letters to scholars, authors, printers, and get complimentary copies of books.That's how we started our library—'Danesh Library'—inside the local mosque. Soon, we had about 400 members. And it was right there that we began putting on our plays and performances . . . It was very popular. When Shari'ati's books began to come out—

Tell me, the local mullah didn't have a problem with your putting on plays inside the mosque?

No. But there was one time where we took a gramophone into the mosque and all hell broke loose—it was an issue solely having to do with the machine. They said that we should only use tape—they had a problem with the LP disc. We were playing Abdul-Baset [a famous Egyptian Qur'an reciter] on a record and the mosque regulars ran and got the clerics and the mullah came and told us to play a tape.

Even for Abdul-Baset?

Even for Abdul-Baset. They wanted us to play a tape, not a gramophone. To them, we had committed a sacrilege and we argued against them. It was this very incident which brought about an epiphany for me. Just the idea that we were bickering over using a gramophone rather than a tape machine [*laughs*]—

[*Laughs*]

This was the same time when Shari'ati was coming to be known. We were already beginning to think more seriously about armed resistance and when this person came along, by the name of Shari'ati, who was beginning to undermine Shi'a concerns, it seemed imperative to find him

and kill him. [*Pause*] I went with some of the other guys to investigate whether or not it would be possible to kill Shari'ati in Mehrab.

Really? In Hosseini-ye Ershad?

In Hosseini Ershad. I went and watched him speak, to see what he was saying—who is this person who they say is attacking the Imam Ali? He spoke for four hours, and I never returned to that mosque. I became a devotee of Shari'ati. [*Laughs*]

[*Laughs*]

It was over! [*Laughs*] The very next day I began distributing Shari'ati books, and they barred me from that mosque, from that library. People in the neighbourhood began to avoid me. I was treated like an infidel. But I kept on buying Shari'ati books and giving them to my friends. But the effect was that, well, my status in that neighbourhood was gone. It became clear that we would have to leave—

'We' meaning who?

Meaning myself and my entire family. As we were renters, we first moved from one part of the neighbourhood to the other but, eventually, we just left and moved to Meydan-e E'dam.

Meydan-e E'dam?

I just tore myself from that place . . . This was all at the ages of 15–17, and I was by then very much influenced by Shari'ati's work. I read all of his works, from beginning to end, twice over. I became a new person. Until then, of the religious authors, I had read Bazargan and Naser Makarem—those sorts of things.

Yes. I remember them.

Behdasht dar Islam ('Hygiene in Islam'), *Ezdevaj dar Islam* ('Marriage in Islam')—that sort of thing. But with Shari'ati, the theoretical base which had made me revolutionary—

Was destroyed—

Was destroyed. And with the armed struggle that was going on around me, I decided that I had to do something myself. And I came to believe that I would not live for more than two years. So I tried to put together another group . . .

By now you're 17?

No, this was when I was 15 or so.

I see.

So we started the group 'Balal', and for about two years we performed underground activities . . .

How many people were in this group?

About seven or eight. There was a girl too. After we were released from jail, one of the other members married her. There were about seven of us, but three of us formed the core. Every time we considered joining up with the Mujahideen or other groups, we ended up not doing so and remained a separate group unto ourselves.

They didn't accept you?

We weren't worth their time. They didn't think we were serious—a bunch of kids.

Since you were 15—

Not only my age. At that time, I was still a short skinny kid.

And how old were the others?

The others were 16 and 17.

And you were the leader of the group?

I was generally the leader.

And what did you do?

We would make leaflets and distribute them. We would rent a room in a boarding house claiming to be from outside Tehran, and we'd rent one of those machines—

A stencil—

Yes, a stencil. We'd print up leaflets. And it was funny—when we distributed them, we'd hear in the mosque: 'Look, someone's put out another leaflet, and see how many grammatical errors it has!' [*Laughs*]

[*Laughs*]

Like we'd misspell 'Arz', as if it were the Arabic word . . . And we were into sports, karate, and we'd spend some time on athletics, some time on political activities, some time on fundraising. The last thing we did—before that, all we'd really done is make leaflets—was to attack that police officer. And during that action I was injured and arrested.

To Take Arms, and by Opposing End Them

So were you with your female cousin, like in your film A Moment of Innocence?

No, that was fictional. There were just the three of us. I think in the story 'The Dumb Man's Dream' there's an allusion to it. From the age of seven until the end of high school was one period of my life, and from the end of high school for a couple of years another. One might say that that era, the political era, continued until—

Tell me, what was the plan in attacking that policeman? This was a plan of the 'Balal' group, no?

Yes—the three of us went to steal the gun off a policeman. Our plan was to go take his gun and use it to rob a bank, so as to widen our activity. When we set off, I had a knife, another had a Molotov cocktail—

You had the knife.

Yes, I was the more athletic and so I was to attack him. When I was young, I was so afraid . . . mostly that my father would kidnap me. Anyone who wanted to would beat me up, even younger kids. By the time I was 16, I could take on five people at once. I still don't really understand how I came to change that much. In fights, even if they broke five wooden boxes over my head, I wouldn't utter even an 'Ouch'. So, the plan was for me to take on the policeman in a fight, for my friend to steal the gun and for the third to block off the end of the alley with the Molotov cocktail. When we set off . . . Those were bad days—the police were always in pairs, one with a handgun and another with a submachine-gun. We had to look around to find a policeman who was alone. The one we chose was guarding two banks on Iran Street. Even though we had investigated all the routes and set all the times for our action—when the street was least crowded

and when he would be least likely to suspect anything—the time and the day we chose turned out to be when the street was crowded, and the policeman was busy talking to someone else. We went back three times hoping the situation would improve, but my friends began to get cold feet. I was afraid that if we didn't do it that same day it would be impossible to convince them to try a second time. So I pressured them to do it that same day. By now the friend who had the Molotov cocktail was soaked with gasoline leaking out of the bottle. I realized that if he tried to light the fuse, he'd go up in flames as well. So we decided against using that. We finally attacked the guy and he began to put up a struggle. My friend who was trying to draw the policeman's gun out of the holster was having some trouble. He was afraid, and he didn't realize he had to release the gun from the holster by pushing it down first—he thought there was some kind of button somewhere. It was in the holster, and he needed to push it down before drawing it out, but he couldn't and so he gave up and ran away. When the policeman pulled his gun on me, I stabbed him, four times, with my knife. As I twisted the knife, he cried out, and his cries still remain in my ears. They were the sort of cries I've only heard people under torture make. These are cries you'll never hear in a film . . . the cries of true pain. As I stabbed him,

four times, he pulled the trigger and shot me in the side. I was wearing old army trousers, which were too big for me. I'd tied them around my waist with an elastic band. After the shot, the band broke and my trousers fell to my feet—

From the bullet?

From the bullet. [*Laughs*]

But the bullet didn't hit you?

It did. I was shot in the stomach. I grabbed my trousers and began to try to run away. He shot at me again, and hit the wall beside my head. The bullet hit the wall and a bit of brick flew off in front of me. My friends were right there—they saw that I was shot and tried to help me but I told them to go, that I couldn't go myself. I looked down at the knife and saw that the blade had broken off . . . I'd left it in his body. The policeman came forward, pointed the gun at my head and fired. I thought I was dead. It turned out he didn't have any more bullets. So he swung his arm and hit me in the head, broke my skull. But then he fell too, unconscious, and I got up and ran. I'd gone down about seven or eight alleys but was caught by the people—this part isn't so important—and turned over to the police. No matter how many slogans I shouted, it didn't affect them. They caught me, beat me, then took me

to the police. They even stabbed me—you can see, they cut my nerves to these fingers . . . I still can't bend these two fingers. They even stabbed my friend in the neck—this was that era—

Did they arrest all of you?

No, they only caught two of us. One got away. He'd been wearing a hat, and he quickly took it off so no one recognized him as having taken part in it and he walked away.

So you were arrested at 17 and put in jail. For four and a half years?

For four . . . I was sentenced to five years. The old regime wouldn't execute anyone under the age of 18. The maximum sentence was five years, which is what I was sentenced to after being convicted in the first degree, and my comrade was convicted in the second degree and given 15 years . . . he was 18 at that time. The friend who got away got involved with the Mujahideen, and became a Communist and bombed some place. His story is really beautiful. He was arrested two years later, and it took two more years for him to be convicted. And he was sentenced to death. They took him onto death row to execute him—he was due to be executed the next morning—and that night Carter became president and the government stayed all executions. And this person, who was a

very disciplined person, on his last night—they would give a cigarette to the convicts on their last night—said to himself: 'Let me enjoy this cigarette, it's my last night.' And the next morning, instead of taking him to the execution, they brought him back to the ward and his execution was commuted. Two months later, all the political prisoners were released and he was released too. But by then he'd got addicted to smoking! [*Laughs*]

This same person joined the Peykar movement and then became one of the Cherikha-ye Fada'ian-e Khalq and was arrested again. He got mixed up, kept on switching his affiliations, and ended up a heroin addict. 'Cut!' After I'd made the film *Boycott*, I was walking down the street and I saw a heroin addict acting strange—it was him, and all he said was: 'Mohsen, you're still destroying the left!' [*Laughs*]

In the Pahlavi Prison

So the next period of your life was the one you spent in jail.

Looking back at my time in jail, that period itself can be divided into two separate eras. During the first, I was enamoured of the people who had ended up in jail—everyone, doctors, engineers, students. Most of the people who had done work similar to mine had been executed,

however, since they were older. Only I, because I was younger, a child when I went to jail . . .

I'd also been tortured quite a lot. After I was arrested, I was in the hospital for two weeks. Then I was beaten and ended up back in the hospital, this time for about a hundred days, with three rounds of surgery. I was torn up all over, especially the soles of my feet which seemed to never stop bleeding. I still have backaches which I think are due to my having been tied to the bed for three months. For about six months I was under medical observation but then, once I entered the jail, I was treated like a hero. I was a young kid who had endured a gun shot, a stabbing, torture, and because I had a good memory and was so literate. In jail, because books were few and far between, the organizational hierarchy was based upon two things. It's true that, since I wasn't in the Mujahideen, I didn't have a place in the prison's social hierarchy. But when you were put in jail in those days, you were evaluated on the basis of the resistance you had been a part of, the importance of the work you had done, and on your memory. If, for example, the core decision-makers were three people, and if they wanted to give a two-hour presentation, these three people were forced to set out the information and then each of these people had to tell two others. And each of these had to tell another two people

and so on until the bottom of the organization. So they would start out with two hours of information, and then, when they checked with the last person, they'd find that a quarter of what he'd tell them had nothing to do with what they'd started with. [*Laughs*] Because of this, they were forced to put people who were good at memorization higher up in the organization, so as to ensure that as much of their message was getting out as possible. And I was quickly put into the central circle of the organization.

Was this an organization of both Mujahideen and non-Mujahideen people?

Yes. At that time the jails were like this: everyone was in it together. Or, at least, they appeared to be so. Later, with the divisions that occurred within the Mujahideen, the religious prisoners separated themselves from the leftist ones. But the organization itself, its structure, was still secret. Eventually, the religious prisoners had one command and the non-religious ones another. Later, it all splintered; the Tudeh followers, the Maoists, the religious leftists, the religious rightists, the moderates. As we came into the Carter era, when SAVAK's [Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar, National Intelligence and Security Organization; Iran's domestic security and intelligence service from 1957 to 1979 and its most hated and feared

institution prior to the 1979 revolution because of its torture and execution of the regime's opponents] pressure was lessened, the divisions grew greater.

However, in that earlier era, I too was part of this organization. But this organization was a fascist one. Not a good one. What one hears about the communist organizations, one can also hear about any of the terrorist ones. So, in '77, I separated myself from the Mujahideen. Earlier, I had had a very close relationship with them, but I didn't say anything for fear of the SAVAK taking advantage of the situation. But they themselves began spreading rumours about me, hence I was forced to speak out against them. And a series of successive divisions took place in the group. Shortly afterwards, Carter was inaugurated . . . My period in prison should thus be divided into two eras: the era I was with them, and the era in which I cut myself off from them because they were fascist in their behaviour.

Meaning what, exactly?

Meaning that they would accuse anyone who didn't follow them exactly as having betrayed them and having joined up with SAVAK. That's how it was there.

You mean they would accuse you of being a stool pigeon?

For them, any person who wasn't part of their organization was automatically considered to be associated with SAVAK. Art, culture—all was suspect to them. In my last year there, I remember writing my first long story. After the revolution, it was serialized in a magazine over seven issues. It was the story of the people from Medan-e Jaleh who had turned me in, five years before, to the authorities, and who now were under fire from the same authorities in that same street . . . It was about the evolution of popular sentiment. That was the first story I wrote while in jail. In any case, while I was in jail, I was constantly in conflict. I, who had gone to jail an enlightened person was released a much more dogmatic one. There was nothing good there—from prison rapes to the suicides, fascism, lies, hypocrisy . . . anything you can think of. To the point that I was completely fed up with it all. And when I decided to break with the organization, I tried at first simply to remain silent but that became impossible. And when I began speaking against them, of the 56 people who were in our ward of the jail, about 28 broke off from them in sympathy with me.

Meaning that they joined another group?

No, they just made their own. A group which was solely in opposition to the organization and which later evolved into the Ommat-e Vahedeh ['Unified Nation']. About 40

people, and one of the seven groups that joined the Mujahideen-e Enqelabi ['Revolutionary Mujahideen'].

Who were the Mujahideen-e Enqelabi?

The Mujahideen-e Enqelabi were more or less based on this group. For example, Raja'i [the second president of the Islamic Republic] was one of the 40, as was Behzad Nabavi, and Mohammad Salamati who ended up being Minister of Agriculture.

You were all in the same ward, then?

It was always being mixed up . . . Every six months or so, they moved everyone around. They were trying to break up the organizations but this actually helped strengthen and unify them.

What is your worst memory of your time in jail?

The torture was perhaps the worst, it bothered me most. You see, we hear about torture—and that torture is different from being beaten—but if you want to understand the feeling of being tortured, perhaps the story I wrote called '*Jarrahi-e Ruh*' ('Surgery of the Soul') can convey that feeling to you. In a moment, a person is put under so much pressure that all of his beliefs are lost to him . . . which is only natural. Generally speaking, when you're cold, you often feel angry. When you're warm, you might feel hun-

gry or sleepy, your inner balance may be off-kilter. Multiply all of that a thousand times and imagine the feeling. And even all of this pales in comparison with the pressures brought about by the organizations in the jails, especially when the schisms erupted—

Hold that thought. First, tell me, what is your worst memory of the torture you endured?

The opposite of what you'd expect, the burning and all these things . . . The worst torture I endured was when they used cables.

What do you mean, cables?

I mean like telephone cord, the thick ones. You know, the sort you see in hardware stores, they come in different sizes, from 1 to something like 40. Well, they had everything from thin wires to thick cables. When they started, they'd tie you to a bed and it would go one of two ways. One was a chair they called 'Apollo'. Consider, for example, this chair [*points*] or one more like a barber-shop chair—the wooden ones . . . Sort of like a business-class seat in a plane . . .

They'd pull your hands back like this, tying down your right hand like this, and your left hand like this, just to the point of breaking your wrists. Then they'd put a

motorcycle helmet on your head. And when they began to beat you, and you began to scream—

Where would they hit you?

On the bottoms of your feet, with a whip. When they beat you, your screams would reverberate in your ears . . . but these details are not so important. When they'd whip you, they'd begin by hitting you here first, here next, here next, very accurately.

By whip you mean with those wires?

Yes, the cables. They kept changing them. After a while, one became numb to the whip, so they'd trade it for a thinner wire which would hurt again. After that, they'd run you . . . you can see that part of it in *Boycott*, the running . . . so that the swelling of your feet would go down and then they'd start again. There was a doctor who came regularly to check you, monitor your condition, give you a serum. They didn't want your blood pressure to fall too much or to rise too much. All these 'services' were to . . . Well, when they first beat me, I felt as if a tree was being swung at my feet, not a wire. It hurt so much that one felt as if one's eyes were about to explode out of one's skull. They'd even tape your eyes shut tightly. It was like . . . you know, when your hand touches something hot, the reflex a body has to that?—well, imagine that sensation in

some part of your body every five seconds, imagine that going on from the morning to the evening. You begin to feel as if you're on another planet, and just then they return you to reality. They wouldn't let you descend into numbness and unconsciousness. They would return you to reality, then they would resume beating you. But the greatest pressure you would feel would be from within. The fear that you might give in, that you might let slip some information that they wanted.

Were they interrogating you?

Of course. They tortured me precisely because they'd heard that I had not given them any information. Since they captured me in the course of an action, they didn't believe us when we said that there were just the three of us involved . . . At that point, the most important thing to you is to not turn in anyone. When they arrested me, I kept on telling them that there were just the three of us. They'd ask: 'Where did you meet each other?' and I'd tell them: 'In the mosque,' and they'd say: 'So, a hole opened in the sky and the three of you fell into this mosque?!' and so they did what they did . . . [*Pause*] Well, what else can I say?

What I want to tell you is that the beatings, the torture in prison—these were not important. If you want to

know about how all that felt, I've described it in 'Surgery of the Soul'. Torture, after it's done, is meaningless. Ten days later, you're the same person as you were before. It's really nothing—no one is altered by the experience of torture. It's no different from the pain of childbirth that women experience . . . It nearly destroys them but later they still enjoy sex, even go on to have more children . . . It's humanity. Torture cannot change even a single person. In its moment, certainly, you are in its hold but, a short while later, you're the same person. But worse was the environment, the insults. If you dared to question someone, to question their ideology, they'd make you out to be a SAVAK informant . . . it was so childish . . . then you'd be 'boycotted'. Imagine living in a cell with 30 other people and suddenly all 30 of them are boycotting you. Imagine no one speaking to you for six months straight. Imagine going to take a shower and finding when you're done that they've taken all of your clothes—so that you're forced to walk around naked, looking for them. You go to the bathroom, and everyone in the bathroom leaves.

They did these things because—

Because you stood up to them. These movements . . . it's like [Sergei] Parajanov, who said that the Soviet government termed him a pederast and so he spent 15 years in

the company of an angel. You see, this pressure draws you inward, it takes you deep into yourself.

During this time, was there evidence of the opposite of what you're saying—signs of humanity, kindness, brotherhood, camaraderie?

Certainly, there were and I've mentioned them in my stories and films. There is the story I wrote of a schoolgirl who was in prison—she fell in love with a boy who was a political activist, who distributed leaflets. Her love was stronger than a political love, one of those loves that are based in the heart and are deep and strong in the mind. She would take a beating, but not give in, not give up her love. These are some representations of prison. But if you see *Boycott*, it does give you a sense of the environment, the feel of prison then . . . The factionalism, the party lines, when placed in the context of imprisonment inevitably lead to fascism. This is because, under that sort of pressure, you can't have too many people making decisions. Democracy is impossible to institute in an oppressive environment . . . When it's necessary to speak in code, debating and voting are impossibilities. Under this weight, and of themselves, many resistance movements collapse. These movements, even if they are committed to democracy, are necessarily clandestine and centralized so as to elude detection and to operate quickly. But this centralism is antithetical to democracy.

At the Dawn of the Revolution

When you were released from prison, were you a more religiously devout person? And were you then tired of organized resistance?

At that time I was turned off to politics. It seemed to me that, well, a revolution had happened, a revolution was happening—incredible, but also worrisome.

You were released from prison in the course of the revolution?

Oh yes, when they released everyone, anyone who was imprisoned.

While you were in prison, were your contacts with Khomeini and Shari'ati and all of those events cut off?

Khomeini and Shari'ati were completely unrelated to my imprisonment. Shari'ati was my religious ideologue, and Khomeini my childhood dream. But it was my own resistance which led to my imprisonment.

When you were released, did Khomeini remain your dream?

Well, while I was in prison, the religious factions split in two, and I was associated with the second faction, the one that was less organized and more independent and which closely identified itself with a populist resistance. When I was released, I was worried that the troubles I had experienced with them—the Mujahideen—in prison, would be

unleashed upon the entire populace should they gain power. You might not believe it, but, even under the worst conditions that I've observed under the clerics, I'd still prefer them a thousand times more than the Mujahideen. They're Stalinists! Even with these [the clerics], there is an anarchy, a looseness of sorts . . . The Mujahideen are a catastrophe waiting to happen! So when I left prison, I started up by writing plays, thinking I might just end up becoming a writer. Do cultural work. I'd written my first short novel in prison—it had an Arabic name, *Ya Muhawwil al-Hawl wa al-Ahwal* [*O the Changer of Condition and of Conditions*!]

When I left prison, I also became involved in the Mujahideen-e Enqelab. You see, to prevent the leftists and the Mujahideen-e Khalq from unleashing their programme on the people, all of us in grassroots groups began to build organizations that would try and stand up against theirs. We established the Mujahideen-e Enqelab-e Islami, which was made up of seven groups. One was made up of people who had returned from abroad, another was made up of people from southern Iran—Mohsen Reza'i, who became the head of the Sepah-e Pasdaran [the Islamic Militia] was originally from that group. Another was the Safr group, which had blown up American helicopters in their military bases. We worked

to bring together this diverse amalgamation of groups which had done so much separately, so as to prevent any of them from joining forces with the leftists or the Mujahideen-e Khalq. The Mujahideen-e Enqelab was at first led by seven people; each a leader of a separate organization. After the revolution, there was a shortage of people to fill the infrastructure of the government. Khomeini needed people who were able to take on the roles of authority—governors, ministers, military commanders—and we began to fill these positions, to identify people to take these positions . . . I was one of the people who had to decide who was qualified for ministerial positions.

You were independently in touch with Khomeini?

No, you see, Bani-Sadr [the first president of the Islamic Republic] became the overseer of the organization, and he was in contact with Khomeini. After that, Jalaleddin Farsi took over, and Behzad Nabavi after him. We had some 200-plus members in Tehran, and 200-plus members in the provinces. The six months after the revolution were spent, first, on liquidating the seven member groups and unifying their members into a single organization, and, second, on strengthening the infrastructure of the revolution. We'd appoint a person to keep watch on things in a certain town to make sure that there were people there making decisions and taking care of problems

that come up. We would take those lower in the ranks of the organization and put them into high government positions: ministers and governors and so on. For example, Raja'i was lower in the ranks of the organization and he ended up in the government [as president], but we were determined not to let Behzad go, although he later did. Even with Raja'i, the truth is that Behzad was running things in Raja'i's name. But after six months, I began to fall out of line with this group—I saw that they were becoming just like the Mujahideen-e Khalq. Fascism took hold. And I decided right then that even if we were to undergo 30 more revolutions—I think I'm well known for saying this—until our culture undergoes an essential change, nothing will change. The first thing that the Mujahideen-e Enqelab decided to do was to set up an organization so as to be able to control the people. This attitude was there right from the start. Then the hunger for power increased, as did the internal strife. So I resigned and began working at the radio as a simple news-writer.

The Politics of the Poetic Turn

Who was in charge of the radio at that time?

It was all mixed up. Every faction, from the Hezb-e Jomhuri to the Mujahideen-e Enqelab—everyone was

involved in some way. [Sadeq] Qotbzadeh [one of Khomeini's earliest companions; later executed for having plotted to overthrow Khomeini's regime] was in charge of radio and television, but he was not involved in the day-to-day work. And the radio productions themselves were done by 12 different people. I was in the production department for a few months, then I moved over to broadcasting. Even a year after the revolution, I was the sole writer in the broadcasting division. They'd have musical interludes for a couple of minutes and I was supposed to write the next segment in that little span of time. And as soon as they'd finished that, it was another two minutes of music during which I'd write the next.

So what did you write?

Mostly gibberish—it's pretty amusing to think about it now. I'd write something right on the spot. For example, 'Don't smoke cigarettes, cigarettes are bad for the lungs' or 'Fish was sold in such-and-such a place and some people fell ill from it . . .' and who knew what the fish had to do with the people! [*Laughs*] Anyone could open the door and say a sentence to me and that'd become a new issue. A full page of writing usually made for two minutes of airtime, and it wasn't possible to play too much music . . . If one played more than a couple of minutes, they'd cut it off—as per the decree of the Imam. I had to work quickly.

For about eight months, from the moment I woke up till I went to sleep late at night, I was writing.

This was the National Radio? Correct?

Yes. You see, they couldn't produce programmes! Each day there'd be about three hours of programming, and the rest had to be live. Occasionally, I'd be running around like a madman. There were three political factions then, involved in radio: the Mujahideen-e Enqelab, from whom I'd disassociated myself. People lower in the organization became my superiors at work. No matter how hard they tried to convince me, I refused to rejoin. I said that I'd cut myself off from all manner of organizations, that I'd become an anarchist! So, every day, the Hezb-e Jomhuri had control of the radio for eight hours, then Bani-Sadr's faction ran things for another eight and then Mujahideen-e Enqelab took over for the last eight. But I was the sole writer for all three. So I had to regulate myself, and say such-and-such during this group's period, something else during the next one's and so on. I'd always say what I wanted to, but I had to always be aware of when it would be most appropriate to have it said. Eventually, they caught on. They got together and said: 'This guy's fooling all three of us!' and they fired me. [*Laughs*]

Those days, Mustafa Rokhsefat [a leading Muslim intellectual activist] decided to put together a group of talented people and inaugurate a centre called Hoz-e-ye Andisheh va Honar-e Islam. It was a place, just a regular house, about three storeys tall, and we used it. He would collect revolutionary slogans there. I decided to collect story-writers. During the time I was in radio, while I was writing all of that material for radio, I wrote 12 short stories as well, and I decided to pursue that path for a while. I remember once [my first daughter] Samira was born—it was the only time my father came to visit, and he brought a couple of presents for Samira.

And when was Samira born?

Right after . . . in '79, exactly a year after the revolution. By this point I'd been in the Mujahideen-e Enqelab for four months and in radio for eight. We sold the presents my father brought, and got 10,000 Tomans for them [since this is the post-revolutionary period and there had been astronomical fluctuations in the rate of exchange, this must be about $10 to $15. In the late 1990s, the rate dropped to about $1 to $1.50]. I took the money and got these 12 stories printed. I called them *Majmu'eh-ye Dastan-e Nang* (*A Collection of Stories of Shame*). One of the stories is about infanticide in Islam, based in the present day and concerning the disappointment people feel on

having a daughter. These stories are very angry, very much based in social realities and problems. My later stories are more traditional and more superstitious. They may technically have been pretty weak, but their heart was based in social concerns, not unlike the second group of films I made, like *The Peddler*. I called my publishing house 'Samira Publications'. [*Laughs*]

For a while I was working both in radio and at the Centre. I decided, while working at the Centre, that it was necessary to find a new generation of short-story writers. I kept track of whoever was writing. If someone wrote so much as a memoir in the newspaper, I'd try to identify them. I contacted many of them. I started a reading circle, where about 20 of us would get together, read what we had written and critique one another. Many of these are now eminent writers of the day. There was, for example, Mohsen Soleimani, who has six or seven books to his credit, others like Ghasemali Farasad, Abbas Ma'roufi . . .

Were there any women in this group?

At first, only one or two. Later, there were more. So, after I began working at the Centre, gathering story-writers, we began to publish some of the stories in a series called *Soureh*, of which perhaps a hundred editions came out. And of this series, I was involved in the publishing of

between 20 and 30. It was the outcome of the work of that generation.

Soureh *was*—

Soureh was the name of the series. We had *Soureh* 1, 2, 3: Collected Stories; *Soureh*: Plays; *Soureh*: Film-scripts; *Soureh*: Poems; *Soureh*: Essays. During this period, I worked at the Centre, writing stories. Later, I began to write plays as well. I wrote about 14 or 15, which make up about a thousand pages, of which only 30 are selected in this collection. The best-known of them are '*Hesar dar Hesar*' ('The Fortress in a Fortress') and '*Marg-e Digari*' ('The Death of the Other'). 'The Siege of a Siege' is the story of two revolutionaries in prison who, even after the doors of the prisons are opened, refuse to come out because, according to their theories, a revolution was not supposed to happen. [*Laughs*]

It was controversial. As for the Centre, although it was started by Mustafa [Rokhsefat], he gradually became less involved with it and much of the day-to-day work ended up being done by me. I had to do this more or less without a budget. So I would start one group and then put together another. First, I started a story-writing group. I remember that, for about an entire year, I slept right there where I worked. All I did all day was read sto-

ries and critique stories. I would read other stories or write my own. For an entire year! After story-writing, there was a play-writing group, eventually a film-script-writing circle. And during this period I mostly wrote, and wrote most of what I have written. This would be from mid-'79 until '81.

So these were all young people whom you were working with? None of the pre-Revolutionary established writers.

No, they were all young.

But you were at that point familiar with the work of earlier writers? Correct?

Yes, by then I had read through the entire history of story-writing in Iran.

Starting with Jamal-Zadeh to—

To Chubak and all the rest.

And as for play-writing, you did the same?

Well, I read what I got my hands on. It wasn't so systematic because plays weren't available like the stories were.

So who did you exactly read?

Beiza'i, Sa'edi . . .

Akbar-Radi?

And some non-Iranian writers. [*Pause*] We also began to work on screenplays, I'd written a script and a group went and made a film based on it called *Tojih* (*Explanation*). It was very similar to Sartre's *Les Mains sales*—a story of a person who was going to put a bomb somewhere and who suddenly notices that there are children nearby. Then the SAVAK arrests him before the bomb goes off and he tells them about the bomb so that the children will not be harmed. And they are surprised at him, and find respect for him. He says: 'Well, I can't go through with it, I didn't mean to kill anyone.' So the script was something like that. But the film was very badly made, and it took a long time to finish. Meanwhile, I went and saw a very bad film made by Iraj Ghaderi. My friends wanted to critique it, but I then realized that I didn't really believe in criticism. Whoever wants to should make the films that they want to make, and instead of critiquing them I'll just make films of my own. A month later, I was starting to make films. Iraj Ghaderi inspired me to make films! [*Laughs*] He made me so angry by making such a terrible film . . .

Cinema Saves

Do you remember what film it was?

It was called *Barzakhi-ha* (*The Imperilled*). A story of a bunch of roughnecks in jail—one of them had killed his

own mother, another had raped his sister. They escape from prison and attack Iraq so as to defend the Iranian people! This really insulted me—that all of us nationalists were no better than people who had killed their own mothers! [*Laughs*] It was a sort of Hollywoodish story, with action and violence and lies. The film I made was called *Tobeh-ye Nasuh* (*Nasuh's Repentance*), and it was the story of a fellow who worked in a bank and who had a heart attack. His family thinks that he's dead and are on their way to bury him. But then his body moves, and they run away. He wakes up and realizes that his family, who he thought had loved him so much, is more afraid of him living than dead. He decides that he was unnecessarily emotionally attached to his family. And if this is the case, then why did he torment so many people so as to support his family? He then begins to take account of all of his sins. For example, some person came to the bank looking for a loan and was refused for no reason. He asks for forgiveness for this. He rebuilt his home so that it was taller, casting the house next door into perpetual shade. He asks for forgiveness for this. He realizes that he's actually done so many of these small things in his life that seeking forgiveness is useless. Better, then, to simply stop doing them. Looking at the film now, I see that it has the sensibility of an Ozu film. Although it's still hard for me to try to understand those early works of mine. I'd now say that

prejudice governs this film . . . though the view is still very much a dry, religious view. But it is very much concerned with the struggle for the betterment of human relations. This is a result of two factors: the first, that my first screenplay was very poorly adapted to film, that from a philosophical and political screenplay they tried to make an action film . . .

Wait a minute. From when you saw the Iraj Ghaderi film until the time when you made Nasuh's Repentance, *how long—*

One month.

And in this one month you gained all you needed to know in terms of the technical aspects of filmmaking?

Well, yes. I really think that it's possible to learn all about the technical side of filmmaking in two months, and that what is much more important is having an idea of what it is you want to say.

And before having seen the Ghaderi film, before you made Nasuh's Repentance, *you'd never even handled a film camera?*

Never. Well, actually, when I was a kid—when my sister was married in Qom—my stepfather had given me a camera. It was one of those old cameras with the viewer on the top. I went into the Shrine of Hazrat Ma'sumeh and took some pictures. I sent the pictures to the magazine

Dokhtaran Pesaran and they were published, but under someone else's name. I still remember his name—I was so upset by it—it was Majid Ala'i Tusi. I went down to their offices and complained: 'I took those pictures, why did you credit someone else?' They said: 'It doesn't matter, take some more and we'll be sure you get the credit.' I gave the camera to someone else, as a gift, and didn't take photographs after that. I hated cameras after that. Even now, after I've made 14 films, I still hate to pick up a camera to take a picture. I think the roots are probably in that first experience. [*Laughs*] I mean, to have made 14 films and to hate photography! It's strange.

And when I made that first film, I hadn't seen films. My grandmother's influence on me, as a kid, led me to refuse even to listen to music. This was because of religious reasons. Even if I passed by a store that was playing music, I'd put my fingers in my ears so as to not hear it. I would occasionally go to the cinema with my mother and my stepfather, who was religious and political. But I'd continually argue with my mother about whether her chador was on right, and so on, and I'd tell her that she'd go to hell for going to the cinema. In that period, when I was involved in political activities, when I was 15–17 years old, I did go see a few films. I even took my mother to one of them, and she made fun of me for going to see a

film after all of my previous dogma. One was *Tangsir* by Amir Naderi, which was considered a revolutionary film. Another was *Fahrenheit 451* by Truffaut, which I still love but which at the time I read as pertaining to the work of the SAVAK and their burning of censored books. Although now it seems more to do with the relationship of film to literature and whether the film will do away with the literature. Yet another was a film called *Madar* (*Mother*)—I don't know which film version of a story it was that I saw. These three films were all that I saw in that period. I saw one at the Capri Cinema, the others at a screening at the university. That was pretty much all. You see, when I was a kid, I was religious. Then I became a religious seminarian. Then came political insurgency. What I did see was theatre. Like those by Sa'id Soltanpour and Naser Rahmani-Nejad and so on—mostly intellectual plays, put on at places like [Chahar-So-ye Namyesh]. I wouldn't see films, because films were at best banal. And in jail—well, we didn't see films in prison or even television, with the exception of the news. But, in '78, the television started showing a series of very good films. Like that Bergman film—I forget its name now.

Was it The Seventh Seal?

Yes. And I saw two Italian revolutionary films on the television then too. After the revolution, I may have seen

another five or six films. One was the one I mentioned, *Barzakhi-ha*, and another by Amir Qavidel. And a handful of others. So, by the time I set out to make *Nasuh's Repentance*, I had seen, in my entire life, less than 50 films.

And in this time, with the exception of Naderi's Tangsir, *you weren't aware of any of the First New Wave of Iranian cinema?*

No. I had seen [Bahram Beiza'i's] *Ragbar* [*Thunder Shower*] in that same period, but nothing else. And I'd read the few volumes of 'Cinema and Theatre' that were put out by Bahman Mas'udi around then. That's pretty much it. I saw [Daryush Mehrju'i's] *Gav* [*The Cow*] after the revolution.

After making Nasuh's Repentance?

Well, I may have seen *The Cow* by then. It was on television.

In any case, your exposure to film was very limited.

Very.

And so, after making Nasuh's Repentance, you went on to—

Do Cheshm Bi Su [*Two Sightless Eyes*] and *Este'zah* [*Seeking Refuge*]. But, remember, before I began to make films or write film scripts, I read short stories and novels and plays every day for about a year and a half. Even though I hadn't seen many films, I was familiar with the literature

behind them. And when it came to making them, I simply thought them through shot by shot—here the character thinks a certain line, here there's a long shot of him from across the garden, here he says such-and-such. And I was no doubt influenced by what I'd seen. Even a 15-year-old kid can look at a script and say: 'Here the mother enters the scene' and so on. When I went to Ershad [Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance], to get money for making the film, they were amazed that I didn't have any photographs to show them or a super-8 film or something. They said: 'How in the world will you make a film with no background in it?' So I went and borrowed some money from my stepfather and a couple of friends. I bought a camera, a Tousi camera, the 'Travelling' model. And a projector, some lenses . . . all for 200,000 Tomans [now about $400]. I made 12 copies of the film, which brought my costs up to 700,000 Tomans. My arrangement was that if the film came out well, I would give it to my stepfather. If it was bad, I'd have to live with it. As it ended up, he liked the film. So my first film was paid for by going into debt . . . sort of like that bookstore I started. The profits from this film financed a sound studio which we built in our Arts Centre. And we bought a crane from abroad and a few other cameras with Scope lenses.

The same crane we see in Marriage of the Blessed?

No. By then I'd left the Centre.

[*At this point I turned my attention to the totality of Makhmalbaf's cinematic career. I wanted him to sum up how he saw the emergence and development of his cinema.*]

So, this is how your filmmaking began. Tell me a little about your films to date. Would you divide them into various periods?

Well, if you want to divide my artistic efforts up into eras, I'd divide it into the first era when I was writing, and the second era when I was making films. For some time I was doing both. As for my films, I'd put them into four periods. The first was made up of *Nasuh's Repentance*, *Two Sightless Eyes*, *Seeking Refuge* and *Boycott* and it was marked by my previous experiences—my run-ins with the leftists, the Mujahideen, my anti-fascism. I was moved by my belief that these organizations were mixing up their ideologies, and that in the end we were left with these groups of people who believed that they alone possessed the truth, something which I think only leads to fascism. Although I know that these are cultural and social problems . . . and I hate fascism . . . I prefer fascism to communism and anarchy.

And I know that, historically, very often religious activism has led to fascism. But this is what I felt, based on these early experiences of mine. And so of these

works—they were either moralistic, like *Nasuh's Repentance*, which essentially is telling people not to live a certain way, or political, like *Boycott*. If you see *Boycott* again, you'll realize that one can distil the film into a few statements which are a critique of fascism. Also, these first works are very influenced by my then-held religious beliefs. Clearly the works of a person who obviously has no background in film, they are full of cinematic errors. Right when I began to make these films, an entire wave of anger erupted from those filmmakers who had not been able to make films after the revolution. Jealous that a new generation of filmmakers were beginning to work, they began to attack me. And these attacks were one of the most educational experiences in my life. Here was someone whom everyone seemed to hate, but anyone who went to see his films was found not to have a problem with them.

They derided you because they associated you with the government?

No, not at all. You see, these film people were more reliant upon the government for their living. But they were jealous, I think, of my films.

How do you mean 'jealous'? How could Beiza'i or Mehrju'i or Kiarostami be jealous of you? They were the acknowledged mas-

ters of Iranian cinema, and you were just beginning to learn their craft. Do you mean that politically and professionally they resented your having resources to make films while they did not?

Politically. Not professionally. The leftists said that I was religious. The religious people said: 'What do we have to do with art?' Every side had its own gripes. Ershad itself, which is the government, criticized us saying: 'Who are these people and why are they making films?' Every person had some insult for me. And I had become a problem. And so my fame, in this early period, is 90 per cent due to the work of my opponents. Some even began to say that my work wasn't really 'cinema'. Which I now have concluded was idiotic . . . All of my work is cinema. Which truth is 'cinema' that the rest of us have to conform to? Each person has their own 'cinema' . . .

I agree. Obviously, you have your own stamp on your cinema. But you knew that you had no experience. You knew that this was an art, that at least you needed to master its basic requirements. Whether or not they were 'jealous', certainly your critics had a ring of truth in their resentment. Don't you agree?

Let me put it this way: after I'd made three films—in 1982, I made *Nasuh's Repentance*; in '83 *Two Sightless Eyes*; and *Seeking Refuge* in '84—I didn't make any more. I decided, instead, to read books on cinema for a year. I

used the same method I had used in prison—something I'd learned from other prisoners—which was to collect everything I could on a certain topic, read it all comparatively and come to a conclusion. I made a list, and got my hands on about 400-odd books on cinema. Translations and edited collections, mostly. Those which were available I bought, others I borrowed or photocopied. Then I spent about six months reading them from morning till night, taking notes on whatever I thought was interesting. I divided the readings into various topics: 'camera operation', 'directing', 'acting', 'editing', 'sound' and so on. Then I further subdivided them: with 'camera operation' I divided the material into 'lenses', 'motion', 'angles', etc., and kept on breaking down the material into smaller and smaller topics. As I read these books, I would note any information I found on these topics into my typology. Of course, some topics became more or less important depending on what information I found. In the end, it was like collecting information from over 100 people on these various topics.

After reading 10 books, the information began to be replicated in the others, and many books seemed to be plagiarizing other books. You only had to check their publishing dates to be able to guess who they'd stolen the material from. When I was done, I had this much material

[*indicates with hands*]. For example, about directing, I might have read some person who in an interview argued against the use of the zoom, or someone who claimed he didn't use filters for such-and-such a reason. I took notes on all of this. And as I began to reduce and edit what I had noted, I found that, for example, one could write down all the information pertaining to camera lenses on a single page. I then stripped down all of what I had written and put it into a small notebook. All of these 400-odd books were distilled into a pocket-sized notebook, with 100 headings. I made *Boycott* after going through this process. And everyone was surprised that the same person who had made those three earlier films had made such a different film. I looked at it this way: anyone who gets a diploma has to read a certain number of books, let's say 120 books, that is, 10 a year. And how many books are needed for a college degree? Twenty a year? Let's say 200 all together. How about a doctorate? Three hundred? Well, it's true that I haven't been to film school, but I've probably read more on the subject as someone who has gotten a doctorate. In my opinion, if you go out and read everything you can on the topic of psychology, you may well know more about it than someone with a doctorate in that subject. You just have to do it. And I had some experience in this. Reading these books after hav-

ing made those films, I realized: 'Oh, that's why I ran into that problem.' So, I spent six months on my education in filmmaking. At this same time, do you remember the *komitehs* [revolutionary committees] who would go around setting up archives of various videos and that sort of thing?

No. I don't. I wasn't there.

There was a place with an archive of 400 videos of films, all of them bad. Things like Beik Imanverdi [a popular actor in mostly commercial films] and so on. Some were Iranian, others foreign . . . all terrible. Among these were 40 or 50 watchable films. So, in addition to my books, from which I learned most of what I needed to know, I also watched 40–50 films. If I think about them, with the exception of a handful, I wouldn't be willing to sit through any of them again. Although at that time I did think that they were mostly worthwhile. I should say that most of my technique comes from those books, not the films. For example, I saw Hitchcock's *The Birds*—one of the good films. And *Bicycle Thieves*. *Citizen Kane*—the more I watch it, the less I understand it! I still think that people who say that *Citizen Kane* is a great film are idiots who are afraid of being found out as idiots, and who continue to parrot the idea that it's a great film. [*Laughs*] I

just don't see why people still say that about it. As for *Boycott*—it's a film that falls between my first and second periods of filmmaking. Considering its content, it falls into my first period, but considering its form it falls into the second.

My second period is made up of three films: *The Peddler*, *The Cyclist* and *Marriage of the Blessed*. All of them deal with social issues. A few years had passed since the revolution and I'd come to believe that these people [this government] were not going to do anything worthwhile either. I asked myself: 'What comes after these slogans?' The left had been beaten down—it's true I had been worried that they might take control—but I realized that capitalism was beginning to pull the strings that controlled the revolution. This is what these films are about. The critique of capitalism and its effects on our society.

By now the form of these films, from a technical standpoint, was beginning to improve. They were well made, and, at that time, were head and shoulders above the average Iranian cinema. This opened the door to the admission of Iranian films into international film festivals. These three films have done quite well on the film festival circuit. Although the directors of Farabi [Film Institute] were worried—other than *The Cyclist*, they didn't officially

send *Marriage of the Blessed* or *The Peddler* to any international film competitions. This was because these films had found enemies inside Iran, and Farabi was afraid that, with the pressure from the right wing, if these films were to win any prizes it would seal the fate of the Institute. So they only gave permission to *The Cyclist*. Even when I wanted to make it, they told me to make it in Pakistan. I ended up filming 90 per cent of the film in Iran and about 10 per cent in Pakistan.

So, the second period contains films concerned with social issues and which are technically well made. As for my third period, it comprises *A Time for Love*, *Zayendeh-rood Nights*, *Once Upon a Time, Cinema* and *The Actor*. The worst of these was *The Actor*, and the best *A Time for Love* and *Once Upon a Time, Cinema*. And *Salaam Cinema* and *A Moment of Innocence* are like *Boycott* in that they sort of fall into this same period. They do and don't. But these four films very certainly constitute a single period.

And how do you define this last period?

Well, they are illustrations of relativity. The problem I have with the films of the second period is that they are like the films in the first period, portraying the leftists as evil and religious people as good—one group is good and another, bad. They have the same flaw. But in these, the

poor are all good people and the evil are the rich—they lack psychological depth. In the first period, truth is defined by religion, and in the second, by, let us say, social justice. In the end, they're all one-sided. Absolutist. It's just that the latter films deal more with social issues, while the former are more philosophical. In the third period, what has changed are the characters. They've become more complex—one doesn't see good people and bad people; everyone is simultaneously good and bad; everyone is grey. This is the most important change in this period. Also, in these films, there is no centre of truth—

How do you mean, 'no centre of truth'?

I mean that truth doesn't exist! In fact, the very focus of these films is exactly this—which truth?

I am not sure if I follow you. You are now talking of 'truth' in what specific sense—as an artist or as a believing person? Or you don't make that distinction yet?

Let me explain a little. In *A Time for Love*, the truth is seen from three sides; in *Once Upon a Time, Cinema*, from at least two sides. *Zayendeh-rood Nights* is the same—it looks at the revolution both from a pre-revolution and post-revolution perspective. Also *The Actor*, which is the

story of a person who wants to become a true artist but the conditions won't let him. The third period of my films is very much defined by this: discussions of the conditions that govern things, represented through multiple perspectives. As for form: they each employ a form which is suitable to its own attempt to view these issues. In my first period, I had a surrealist work—*Seeking Refuge*; in my second period I had another—the third segment of *The Peddler*; and in my third period—*Once Upon a Time, Cinema*. In each period, I also have a realist film: In the first period—in *Two Sightless Eyes*, there is that long scene shot in Mashhad. In the second period—the first segment of *The Peddler* and, to some extent, parts of *Marriage of the Blessed*. In the third period—parts of *Zayendeh-rood Nights* and *The Actor*. In terms of style, I wrote in my introduction to the book *An Introduction to Islamic Art*, that genre is secondary to the primary changes of the content.

What is this book, An Introduction to Islamic Art?

An Introduction to Islamic Art is about 160 pages long and is a theoretical look at Islamic art. Some of it is rubbish, but some of it is very interesting and represents my present opinions.

Explain that to me a little more.

Some parts of it show the influence of relativism on me. The most important thing about my third period is that I moved from absolutism to relativism, that the characters became grey instead of black and white. The form is not much of an issue, as I have always played with the notion of form. There is a fourth period, which you can say begins with *Gabbeh* or you can go back to *Salaam Cinema* where I have moved away from philosophy and—

But given your earlier typology, you had placed Salaam Cinema *into the category of your sociological films—your third period?*

In all of these categories, you can see qualities that carry over from the first to the second, the second to the third. You can, for example, say that *Gabbeh* is a reflection on the first period . . . especially in the shot of the hand that reaches for the sky. You can't just say 'Cut!' and become a completely different person. It's not like that. Themes disappear and return. For that matter, you can argue that *Salaam Cinema* should fall into the second period—but then how would you reconcile the fact that it presents multiple views, changing perspectives? What drives the film is the tension of being on this side of the table or on that. Which is why I put it into the third period, where these questions are raised. But, you know, it's very bright

and optimistic. The first period of my work is very dark, black almost, hopelessly so. The second period is also dark. The third is also dark, but less so than the first two. But it's in the fourth period that the light begins to enter. It's the worldly nature (Sohrab Sepehri) of the first period to which I am attracted, but the worldliness of the fourth period has made the greatest impact on me. As for the content of this period—I move to life and humanity. Whatever that is. I moved away from these deathly serious subjects. But I can't really say much more about this fourth period—I can't judge just yet. But you can see some things in *Gabbeh*. For example, that colour relates to more than simply form. It's as if I grew tired of black and white. I can't say which parts of it are intentional and which simply subconscious. I need to be farther from it all to be able to judge. But I can judge my third period well. You know, in the fourth period, it's as if I don't have the patience even for relativism. I can say that in this period I am looking at two general questions—one: multiplicity of perspectives, and the other: human sorrow. I am searching for an emotional perspective, and the warmth of my films comes from the joy of living in the framework of human sorrow . . . but not a flaky kind of sorrow. And I have been looking at the constitution of this sorrow, I'm still looking for it. This past year was very similar to the

year before I made *Boycott*, when I sat and did nothing but read. These days I've been watching many films, having discussions, thinking. I've been thinking about the future, this fourth period, I've been thinking about what I should preserve from the earlier periods, and how to move ahead.

The Loss of a Partner

Mohsen, now tell me about your wife, tell me about your conception and experiences of love, of your marriage, of the birth of your children, of the tragedy—

When I came out of jail, as I've told you, for about three months I was caught up with the establishment of the Mujahideen-e Enqelab. When the revolution did occur, it took us by surprise. We had thought that we would need to struggle for two or three more years before we would see the revolution succeed. Of the three of us who were arrested, one was Hassan Langarudi, who was related to the woman who was to become my wife. After the revolution, just a week or so after, he told me he had decided to marry that girl who had been a comrade of ours. He then asked me: 'Don't you want to be married?' And I said that I did, why not? [*Laughs*] So he told me that he had a relative whom I might like. I asked him if he knew her well,

and he said he did. Her family was relatively poor. Her mother had passed away while her father ran a store, and was remarried with seven or eight children. He told me that she was very active in the revolution, in the demonstrations and so on. Would you believe that I agreed to marry her without ever having seen her? When they went to arrange for the engagement, I was too embarrassed to go and didn't.

They gave me a picture of her. I remember I was at the headquarters where we dealt with organizational matters, like arranging for Bani Sadr to come and speak and so on, when I ran into my friend and asked him if he had a picture of my wife-to-be. At that same moment, all of a sudden, the sound of gunfire rang out from the roof and I became afraid—I thought they were executing someone. It turned out that they had executed the warden of the jail I had been in. I just heard the gunfire, and then it was announced over a loudspeaker that they had executed him. I was shocked—it was a bad moment. So you can see what strange circumstances surrounded our union!

And when the marriage was arranged, all I owned were a pair of very worn army trousers. When I went to her house, her stepmother opened the door. We exchanged greetings, and she asked if I would come in. I

said no, that I was Mohsen, her stepdaughter's fiancé, a friend of Hassan, and that I'd come to make the arrangements for the wedding. So I saw Fatemeh then—she was a few days shy of 18. I was 22. We spoke, and it was decided that we would marry—even though she was a few days short of 18—and that we'd get the licence afterwards. Then her stepmother very politely asked if, at the marriage, I would not wear the same pair of trousers. [*Laughs*] I said: 'Never! You can't change my beliefs!' [*Laughs*]

I had a younger cousin who owned a suit, and I tried it on. It was too small for me—the sleeves were too tight, the trousers were all wrong. [*Laughs*] Then I went to a barber, thinking I should get my hair done right. Instead, he messed up and gave me a terrible haircut. Imagine—a half-bald man in a weird suit! (*Laughs*) What a wedding! I didn't want a licence or anything. I wanted to be like Imam Ali and Fatemeh. Of course, her name was Fatemeh. That's what it was like, with these slogans in our heads . . . There's that scene in *Marriage of the Blessed* when one character says: 'It's impossible to live like Imam Ali and Fatemeh.' At that point, it was impossible to live without those slogans; all I had then were these slogans. I had a motorcycle, a mini-Yamaha. So we made the arrangements, and it was fixed that we be married a few days later.

Also, remember, in those days everything was run by the *komitehs*, the whole country was run by *komitehs*. Behzad [Nabavi] asked me: 'Where were you yesterday?' and I replied: 'I was busy getting a wife.' He said, 'Is this the time for getting married?' [*Laughs*] The two of us went to Refah School [the headquarters of their activities] and got two shovels and a broom. Then we went to the old Majlis Building [the Iranian Parliament Building] which some civilians had taken over. We went inside and swept and prepared a room so as to bring the military operations from Refah over to the Majlis. In those days, Bazargan was at Refah, the prisoners were kept at Refah, Imam Khomeini was staying at Refah, and it was also the place where people came to hand in the guns they'd got hold of during the revolution. It was crazy. So we cleaned up this place, fixed up a telephone and set it up . . . That's how it was in those days after the revolution. Some people would have taken over a building and would say: 'We should get up and get ready for the guests.' The next day, that house would become the Department of Foreign Affairs. [*Laughs*]

So in this hullabaloo, I was married. And then I realized I wasn't even interested in being married . . . We didn't even have a licence then. We got a couple of mattresses, a couple of lamps, some plates, some forks and moved

into a tiny room fit for a cockroach. Just like [Ali Hatami's film *The Downtrodden*] *Suteh-Delan*. I saw *Suteh-Delan* later, and fell in love with it because it was so like life then.

When I left the political organizations and moved into the radio, Fatemeh came with me. I wrote for it and she became an announcer. When Samira was born, we'd take her with us to the radio station. There was a couch there. During the nights, I'd write and they'd sleep, then I'd sleep and she'd make announcements. The two of us worked and the child was always with us. [*Laughs*]

So when I went to work at the Arts Centre, I borrowed some money and built a house, on the other side of Vali Asr [Avenue], between a couple of brick ovens. A building with one room. When you opened the door, there was a small hallway, a single room, a yard in the back. As simple as possible—a room, a kitchen, a bathroom, a couple of walls and a yard. When they extended the road out to our house, the house sank because it was built on unsettled ground. And we lived there until I made *The Peddler*. Fatemeh was with me when I made most of these films—*Seeking Refuge*, *Marriage of the Blessed*, not so much during *Boycott* because we had another child by then, and *The Cyclist* but not during the parts shot in Pakistan. Somehow, until the end we worked together.

But then, by 1992, we were forced to move again. One of the problems with my increasing fame was that, every day, we'd find a group of people standing outside the door. Especially with my second-period films, which dealt with social issues. People would come looking for a loan, thinking that since I'd made *Marriage of the Blessed*, I would certainly lend them some money. They'd come with their sick children . . . to the point where we were forced to move. In the middle of the night, four a.m., the doorbell once rang and I found a Pasdar standing outside. I thought he'd come to arrest me! Then he said: 'I want to take the University exam in the arts, what should I study?' And I said: 'At four a.m.?'

I had to move about 13 times—every few months . . . Sometimes we'd rent, other times we'd buy. Sometimes we'd buy cheap and sell expensive, sometimes vice versa. It was like this. The last place was a place we'd bought. In Dolatabad. I don't like telling this story. She had some plastic sweat pants on, and went to light an oil-lamp we had and some of the oil got onto her. The pants caught fire . . . The neighbours rushed in to put it out but it was too late. . . It only took a minute. That night she was at home with her sister—they were watching a film—and both of them were burned. Her sister was burned because, as soon as she saw the fire, she reached out to

help and her clothes caught fire as well . . . her clothes were plastic too, and she ran from the living room to the kitchen upstairs and her entire body burned. It's like . . . how can I describe it? Look at a matchstick that has burned and think of a human in its place. Fire . . . a spark landed on her clothes, and, as she slapped at it to put it out, it only spread. So she tore her clothes off . . . Those plastic clothes are the worst . . . as soon as it catches, it sticks to your skin and burns you. All of this because of plastic clothing. In a second a little oil, a spark flew and grew into a huge flame . . . it took a minute.

Was this a water heater?

No, it's like one of these, except for the fact that these are electric [an electric space heater]. The ones we used were oil ones, and, as she went to light it, she splashed some oil onto herself and caught fire. When she caught fire, she began to run all around the room. And the neighbours ran in and tried to put her out. I was at my mother's house. It took five days . . . the clothes sticking to the skin and . . . And I thought that if we moved from that house it would become a tomb . . . [*Pause*] Well, as for my children, Samira was born a year after the revolution, Meytham was born two and a half years after the revolution. Hana was born as I was making *Marriage of the Blessed* . . .

So your wife was very actively involved in your work.

Yes, very much. She also acted in *Once Upon a Time, Cinema, The Actor* and a few of the others. Whenever I needed a role filled, she'd do it. If I needed a nurse, for example, in *Marriage of the Blessed*, she'd put on a nurse's outfit and act. She'd play many roles, all bit parts. She was also involved in the screenplays, especially in writing the women's roles. My children are also in many of my films . . . That's how it was . . .

I didn't fall in love—our love was a love that came after marriage. Fatemeh was a normal South Tehran girl. She was surprised when she saw that so many of my comrades ended up becoming ministers and so on in the years after the revolution. She would joke that the revolution was a sham because so many of my friends became 'somebody' [*Laughs*]. She wouldn't take herself too seriously. [*Pause*]

Tell me about your second marriage.

My second marriage coincided, more or less, with the making of *Salaam Cinema*. That is, two years later. I married Fatemeh's sister, Marzieh. [*Pause*]

And you've not had any more children?

No, you see, Marzieh can't have children. And I don't want any more.

Art As a Future

I have another question. Do you think you'll stay in the cinema, or do you think that you'll move on as you have from story-writing and play-writing?

A problem I had in the 1980s was that I didn't know who I was. I'd written stories, plays, screenplays, articles and I began making films. And even in filmmaking I was all over the place. I edited my own films . . . I was all mixed up. Whoever I asked for advice didn't seem to be able to give me a clear answer to the question of what it was I was best at. I didn't get a clear enough sense from anyone. I grew bored with theatre because I don't really like the technical side of putting on a play. That's why I never directed a play. I couldn't continue with all of these pursuits—I wanted to focus my efforts on a single thing. But I couldn't get a satisfactory answer from others . . . I tired of theatre. I also tired of writing criticism—it was too dry for me. I felt too young and I had to use this fatherly tone in criticism. And writing stories was a slow process . . . So, little by little I began to find myself drawn to filmmaking. My introduction to filmmaking was as accidental as my meeting my wife. I married my wife and then later fell in love with her. When Fatemeh died, it took me two years to come to terms with it. I was unwell . . . I couldn't work.

If you ask me what the worst experience of my life is, I'd say that it was losing the person who was with me day and night. She was amazing. She would take care of the children, run the house, keep in touch with our relatives, help the wives of my friends . . . And, suddenly, in a second, it was as if something was erased which had for me a million memories. I fell in love with her slowly, and my love for film was similar . . . I fell in love with it little by little.

And there were other factors. My best-selling book sold 120,000 copies. In Iran, books are published in runs of 3,000. So 120,000 copies of a screenplay is really a lot. But then *Boycott* had one million viewers in Tehran alone! Statistically, this is how cinema is different from writing stories. One day's ticket sales of an unpopular film of mine is equivalent to five years' sales of a popular book of mine. I couldn't get away from this fact. I don't make films for posterity, just for myself. Communication is important to me. Also, all of these things I was doing—writing plays, short stories and so on—all of these are present in filmmaking.

But in a more complete and mutually complementary fashion.

Exactly. I even think about the music I use in my films . . . so I'm even somewhat of a music composer! Photography

is also important, as is theatre. Film is simply a more complete art form. And the possibilities are greater. It's because of cinema that I've seen so much of the world that I no longer have patience for travel. Last year, I had 40 invitations. This is because of cinema's international scope. Literature isn't that way. In Persian, we only have a few books that are translated into, say, English. Hardly any. But how many Iranian films have been sent to every corner of the world? Cinema is a more international art, it uses a more humanistic language to speak. These reasons made my choice to pursue film an easy one. I forgot all about writing for publication. In cinema, of course, I am still involved in a thousand different things. I write screenplays, I direct, I edit . . . I'm only happy to write screenplays that I know I will direct, and I only like to direct my own screenplays. I don't like producing films, but I can't let anyone else produce them either. I see the three stages as being inherently interconnected.

And what about those people who argue that directors should never produce their own films?

I don't agree. Film is a very idealistic thing . . . it only becomes more real as it is shot, and finally edited. But it all emanates from that first idea. If I had allowed anyone else to take control of producing my films, they wouldn't

be my ideas which made up the film. It is possible that the labour be realistically divided up, and different people help out in the making of it. But I don't agree that the process is enhanced by having three ideas divided up rather than simply one. It's like you were to write a book and give it over to some other person to edit. I don't accept that process. You may still have your opinions expressed, but the presence of the other person will be there, at least one per cent.

So you don't see yourself moving towards a new artistic outlet any time in the future?

What would I do?

There's nothing else you'd like to work on? Music, photography and so on? Why dwell on cinema? Other than the practical reasons you just outlined, why cinema? What is in it that creatively or aesthetically satisfies or at least engages you?

Let me turn that around. I have another experience, which I call 'spiritual life'. When I was in jail, the hierarchy forced us, when we turned out our lights at 10 p.m., to sit and think in detail about what we'd done that day, what was right and what was wrong with what we had done. At the end of the week, we were supposed to tell one of the leaders what we had done, both good and bad.

I was one of those leaders, one of two people who, at the end of every week, heard from 112 people about what good and bad they had done. We would try to get a sense of what trends were taking hold of the group, which way they were moving. Of course, the way in which one would gauge what was good and what was bad changed over time. I slowly became more minimal in my own reports. The slogan that sticks with me, which I try to apply to my life, is '*Hazf-e ezafat*'—'Purge what's extraneous.'

The notebook I had told you about, the one in which I summarized my readings on film, had a single sentence in the beginning: 'Kubrick: Today's world is more greatly afflicted by an abundance of knowledge than it is by ignorance.' I'd concluded that these 400 books would best have been summarized in 10 books which could give someone the necessary information. How much time does a person have to spend reading in a lifetime? If we read a book every day, we'd end up reading 365 books a year, which come to 3,650 in 10 years. And if one were to live for 50 years and do nothing but read, how many would that be? It would be some 17,000 books. But a new library in Paris, I've heard, has 70 million books. So even this person who has read 17,000 books is nowhere when you think of that library. We don't really have time any longer. We need to summarize, to be able to read things for their

essence. So that is what my motto means: 'Purge what's extraneous.' For me, it begins with clothing. You see what I have on right now? I have an extra pair of socks, an extra pair of underwear, another shirt and a jacket. Any more would take up my time.

In our house, you won't find a single book. A book should be read and put aside. I read all of those books on film and had enough of them. I don't refer back to them. It's the same with any of my research topics. Once I read about 130 books on psychology, then I put them aside. I read a number of books on economics, on the constitutional revolution. I read them, then put them aside. I'm minimalist. I'm not interested in anything new. I'm in my forties, I'm like a horse with blinkers on. I believe that there are limits to a human lifetime, but what a human can know and learn is great. If we allow ourselves to follow our interests into every nook and corner, we won't gain any deep knowledge. We'll become shallow. I wouldn't want that. So, for me, it's simple. Every so often I write a screenplay, then I go ahead and make it into a film. It means I make a film about once every year or two. If it were not possible, I don't really know. I don't like the idea of having to try to do something else at this point.

Let me ask another question: These 40-odd countries you've travelled to—

I didn't go to 40-odd countries. I had 40 or so invitations, and my films have been shown in around 70 countries. I myself haven't travelled so much . . . I don't like to. The most important trip was that first one to London, the first time I ever saw the West. I felt as if all my life, whatever bad things I had been told about the West were lies. They had taken what was different between the East and West, distorted them, given me a vulgar notion of what the West was. Seeing *Wings of Desire* by Wim Wenders and seeing England coincided for me. Their effect was that I became ill, so much so that for 15 days my head ached. The shock was so much . . . No film had had such an effect on me as *Wings of Desire* did.

In what way? What did you like so much about Wings of Desire?

All the religious slogans I used to chant?—all of them were right here in that film, and yet the film represented the West! But I had already begun to reach these conclusions on my own. You see, three years earlier neither the film nor the environment would have had an effect on me. People first reach conclusions, then need some proof to bear witness to their conclusions.

You needed Wim Wenders to confirm you in your own conclusions.

Exactly. First, you arrive at a relativist position—when we were in Locarno, I heard from you that when Ibsen was about to die he said: '*Az taraf-e digar*' . . . —then you hear or see something that makes it mean something to you. Otherwise, you can't grasp it. Or you reach the conclusion that everything is absurd and strange, and a hidden force takes shape in your soul which brings everything in life into question. You feel that in all the happiness and beauty of life, there is a certain futility. That's why it's good to see the fun in things, not to take everything so seriously.

You know, Ozu asked that they not put his name on his grave—only write the word 'nothing' upon it. Then you understand it, you see that Ozu was right . . . It's true that Ozu is not 'nothing', that we find a million lives within his work. But all of that is still nothing before the enormous process we call life. And it's for that reason that I say that I don't think I'd try to do anything but be a filmmaker from now on. Once or twice, after the tragedy of Fatemeh, and when the censors tried to stand in my way, I did think that I might give it up. But even if I was to change my work, I'd only consider doing the simplest sorts of jobs. I'd never take a position with any responsibility: even if I were to have to, for example, run an arts centre, I'd refrain from even going so far as to say that 'This is so-and-so's desk' and so on. I love filmmaking

because there is motion in it. I couldn't go to a location and work in the same place every day. My entire life is caught up in motion and constant change. Which is why I work to simplify, to reduce, to summarize to the extent possible everything in my life.

Based on that premise, what drives your work most at the moment?

Right now, as I told you, in my work only two things are of interest to me. Life, and humanity. And I don't mean religion or ideology when I say 'humanity'. Human in the rawest sense. We are alive and therefore must live, and we are humans and so have to be humans. That's it. That's all. These are the most essential things we have.

When you speak about issues indigenous to Iran, and when you speak about them in New York, Tokyo, elsewhere . . . and when a spectator you never could have imagined existed sits down and writes critiques of your work—what do you think about this?

Well, whoever comes who wants to—

No, no, the issue is this: while you are making a film that concerns issues that are native to Iran, suddenly you find an audience that is more and more international—

You see, the colour and flavour of my work is native to Iran but its contents are not. My work concerns birth, life

and death. *The Peddler*, for example, is in three sections. The first concerns a birth, the second a life and the third a death. Now, it may be placed in Iran but it's the story of all of humanity! The story of coming and leaving, the story of love, of life. The meanings of these are the same for anyone anywhere. Even if you make a film about Iranian nationalism, it will still resonate elsewhere for people who have experienced their own nationalism.

No. This is not what I mean. I too believe that unless an art is perfectly particular it cannot be perfectly universal. Ray's cinema and Kurosawa's cinema are perhaps the best examples. Let me put it another way. Have you ever come across a critic from either Europe or Asia or Africa who has interpreted a film of yours in a way which you've found strange or which you've been surprised by?

Well, yes, I've been surprised by things people have said but there have often been errors that have been spread by various media—lies or errors which have been picked up and spread and which have influenced certain critics and distorted their opinions. For example, for a while I was said to have been a cleric in the ruling regime in Iran. So these critics would see my work and try to understand how it was that I had come out of my clerical garb. When the very basis of their assumption was untrue. Another bit of misinformation was that I am an avid watcher of films.

The truth is I don't have the patience to do so—that's my problem. [*Laughs*] If only I really had a chance to sit down and watch films! I've told you about the efforts I made to watch films during that one period. Somehow it got out that I had spent years in obscure archives, watching films. The biggest archive I've yet seen is Bahman's [Maqsudlu's] right here in this house! Where is there an archive in all of Iran? Especially after the revolution. There is no such. There is the National Film Centre—and what can you get from them? What I've done is read books on film.

Another rumour is that I'm completely self-taught—again, wrong. I've been greatly influenced by the books I've read on films and filmmaking. I've learned from books, from my life. Just because I've not officially studied it shouldn't make me strange! I studied on my own. And I've not really seen lots of movies—I've just read many film books. For example, I love to read about Ozu, but when a film of his is shown they always say: 'Let's invite him . . .' but I don't have the patience! [*Laughs*] But give me an article about Ozu and I'll read it right away. And the next day I'll sit down and write a scene that captures the essence of what I'd gained from reading the article. But yet these lies are still written about me—that I've watched dozens and dozens of films, for example.

And the effect is that any young person interested in my work thinks that he or she has to watch dozens of films to understand them, goes to see these films and learns nothing, while I argue that one has to learn from books or speak to people who are knowledgeable about the subject. One can learn so much more from reading than from watching! From watching, one can learn about living, that is true. But to understand the theory, one must read the theory.

Another thing concerns the censorship which exists for us—within it, we can never say everything. We can only say half of what is true. Hence, the way in which things are arranged must in the end represent what it is we are trying to say. Take, for example, that interview with me in *Sorush* [magazine]. In it, whatever I said, left or right or whatever—it was all true. But if you take what I said out of the social context in which I said it, the statements by themselves are misleading—as if someone took a sentence out of this very conversation concerning the time I attacked that policeman and published it without explanation. People would say: 'What is wrong with that Makhmalbaf! He's still talking that guerrilla stuff!' In reality, I'm speaking critically about that event so that others will see it critically! You see what I mean? They always say that the newspaper didn't have space, so they

cut the beginning, they cut the end, and you're left with these out-of-context statements . . .

Going back to the thing you just said, about not being able to say the whole of what one wants to say. Someone once said that every poet has a poem from which all of his poems are derived, but the essential poem is never uttered. Similarly, there may be a film in your mind, one that you feel that you must make. And you believe that some day you will in fact make that film. All of the films you make until then will in some way be attempts to realize that film. Now, when you say—

Well, let me tell you that for a while I lived with my aunt in her home, along with my grandmother and my stepfather and mother. You can see this house in the film *Boycott*, where it's the home of an old woman. There were intense interactions and relationships which developed in this small house with only four rooms. It seems to me that I am always trying to make that film. Everything goes back to my childhood, then. And as for censorship—it's as I said. We are always only saying half of what we mean. In a society which is full of censorship, of self-censorship, I can never say what I mean fully. For example, can I even begin to speak about how I think that I've mixed up the constitution of my grandmother's religion, how I think my intimate feelings towards her were intermixed with religious feelings, and—

Well, that's not such a strange thing. One of the greatest living Iranian poets once told me that one day, while he was once watching his grandmother comb her hair, a ray of light struck her silver head. And he said: 'I saw God at that moment.' And he is an atheist.

True . . . So anyone who came and told you he was related to your grandmother you took in and received, only to find that he was like that father who abandoned you. You see? My story is a story of periods of infatuation and disillusion; first an infatuation with political activism then disillusion, then an infatuation with philosophy, then disillusion . . .

Don't you think that that says more about you than about philosophy, political activism, or your friends and family? What period of your work would you consider to be most successful?

I don't really know. One can only speak about that from the outside. If you take the films of Amir Naderi, most people say the same things—that if he would return to his early themes he would be more successful, etc. But with me, it seems that there is no outside consensus. There is no unified view that a certain earlier theme was the most successful. With me, one person says a certain work is a masterpiece while the next person will say it's terrible. Like the woman at the art museum loves *A Moment of*

Innocence but thinks that *Gabbeh* is nothing much, a little film. And I can't gauge based on my respect for the person—one excellent critic will, for example, prefer *A Moment of Innocence* while another will prefer *Gabbeh*. The commentators do nothing towards letting you know which film is better at saying what you want to say, which one is more 'you'. They did nothing towards helping me resolve the question of whether I was better suited to be a writer or a filmmaker. I am neither . . .

The Poetics of a Visionary

Let's speak about poetry. Do you prefer classical poetry or modern?

Oh . . . I have a lot to say about poetry, Iranian poetry. It's something I have no expertise in but have many emotions about. Of Iranian poets, I personally prefer Forough [Farrokhzad] and [Sohrab] Sepehri. Of [Ahmad] Shamlu—his use of words is sublime but I don't really like his poems. However, strangely, when I want to summarize a thought or idea—for example, when I want to explain that despite not being a nationalist I have certain feelings linked to Iran, I always say that 'in Shamlu's words "my light burns in this house."' See what I mean? While I have to admit that I don't really like that poem myself. Of the others, I have no great love of most, even Nima [Yushij]. But I do like Forough. But one has to read all of

Forough's work to understand why it is that I despise parts of it and think that parts of it are unequalled. But in general, I am moved by Sepehri.

In my opinion, people are of three sorts. The first are those who have baseless miseries, a million tiny miseries. One morning, I woke up and told myself that I had to disgrace myself. I had been trying to sleep, but a remark someone had made six years ago about me was suddenly bothering me. I lay there for a couple of hours before I got up and told myself that I had to disgrace myself, because I was letting myself be distracted by this tiny misery. I said to myself that I needed to become infamous, because I was supposed to be better than to be caught up with this sort of concern over who said what about me how many years ago. That's it—some people are preoccupied with tiny miseries.

Another type are like children, they live for and in happiness. Meaning that they delight in living. Some are more like that, some are less. Those with tiny miseries are generally romantic people and have any number of maladies. Those who delight in living are at ease with themselves. They don't allow themselves to be set back by troubles. This friend of mine's mother, for example, is of the second variety. She delights in life, she avoids disappointment. She's like a child, really, in that.

The third type are those who are burdened with human miseries. Forough, in her first three books, is filled with these tiny miseries.

Which one of these three types is you?

You see, in my films I find that I'm searching for that simple delight in life, and I am also concerned a little bit with that human misery I mentioned. I hate those tiny miseries, although some of my films are filled with them. *The Actor*, for example. For me, then, Sepehri is more and more a model for what I would like to express. He has his roots in Khayyam, in childhood. I believe that art, when it returns to two things, is most effective. For example, think of Picasso, in his early Cubist period, when he was doing portraits influenced by African art—all those forms he adopted from African portraiture which are both simple and engaging. They are familiar to everyone, like primitive cave paintings. Or think of artists who take us back to the state of childhood, the infancy of mankind. My theory about actors is that those actors are most effective who seem to us both innocent and charismatic. Charlie Chaplin is of course the epitome of that; both innocent and charismatic. We dislike passively innocent people . . . the ideal protagonist is a guiltless person who is active in living. That is why we enjoy watching well-spoken,

talented children; we accept them as innocent because they are children, and we are attracted to their energy.

For me, finding characters who fit this ideal has become a treasure hunt. Because the charisma of these characters comes from their living, and their innocence comes from their humanity. Sepehri has a good deal of innocence, but his charisma is low. Forough is very charismatic, but is less innocent. Of the other authors, I really dislike Sadeq Hedayat, really. But these days, Sepehri is for me like a prophet who loved life. Most ideologies are based on messages of death, even Marx. Marx is concerned with social justice, it's true, but more than anything he was a prophet of death. If I have come to terms with Sepehri, it's because of two lines of his poetry where he says: 'I am a Muslim, I pray towards a rose-flower, my prayer-mat is a river . . .' Sepehri . . . with a certain naturalism, he's critiquing this country of ours.

But his commentators in Iran have turned him into a latter-day Sufi. That's a different issue, though. Let me ask you this: you yourself say that you used to see things more darkly than . . . how did it come to be that you have changed?

It's as if one is upset, does his shouting and cursing, throws the door open, is angry at everyone sitting in a room. It may even be that he has something to say that

they should pay attention to. But after he gets it off his chest, what is left for him to do? He either has to leave, or sit down and say: 'OK, someone go and get some food for us all to eat, let's drink some tea together . . .' [*Laughs*] The darkness, you could say, might have been there in society but was more there in the way I looked at things. The other thing, I'd have to say, is due to a more simple event: fatherhood. A father wants nothing more than for his children to live in peace and with hope. After my wife passed away, I found a million poems to read to my children to keep them hopeful. You see, you live hating the idea that your child might grow up a revolutionary . . . [*laughs*] . . . even become the leader of the great world revolution. Slowly, you begin to see all of humanity as being similar to your children. You begin to feel as if you don't have the right to stand in the way of their peace. This is fatherhood. Especially when they're adolescents. At that age you worry that they not lose their lives for some cause. Because fatherhood influences you to work for their peace, their hope. So one reason I've changed is fatherhood, just the process of ageing.

Another is social reality. If society is colourful, then so am I. If I can't say anything, then I have to say it with colours. You see, I saw that although they were making society black, I myself was talking about nothing but its

blackness. And I slowly came to accept that I believe in nothing but the simple fact of existence—living. Living is white. So my ideology is white. And this was brought home to me on a trip I made to India.

When was this trip?

The first time I went to India. I had written a rather black screenplay, called *A Moment of Innocence*, which has some white parts but its basis is black. We left the airplane, and the taxi ride to the hotel took us about an hour and a half. We passed a wide walkway, full of people. It seemed a million beggars of all shapes were camped there. It was around dusk, but every one of the million beggars was dancing! They didn't have even a bowl to beg with . . . and they were of every sort, men, women, children, cats . . . torn clothes and all. Every one of them, like Amir Naderi's characters, was up and dancing. And I thought to myself that these people are crazy! And I kept on waiting for us to pass them and go on, but the street would not end . . . The entire hour-and-a-half ride we did nothing but pass people like them.

What city was this?

Bombay. 1990 or '91. At first, I thought that it must have been a religious holiday, or that some superstition had

moved them all to hysteria. But it seemed that this was a normal thing—that they would do this every night. So I couldn't stop wondering: what is driving these people to dance like this? And then the Indian cinema . . . one should never forget about the Indian cinema. Of course, something like one half of the world's films are made in India. And the cinema is such an important part of society there. These same beggars first ask for a coin to buy a bit of food, then they'll ask you for money to buy a ticket to the cinema. They lose themselves in dreams in the cinema. And why not? This is a country with pretensions towards socialism but which has never had the economic base for it. They had revolutions which were meant to bring about social justice, but it became clear that progress was oriented only towards technology and science, that these things were supposed to bring about welfare for the people. So are they going to go see my films, or the films of Satyajit Ray, to decide that they are poor and destitute? Let them dream! The base necessary to help them simply doesn't exist. It's like the sick child who is waiting for the cure to his illness. They medicate him until then so that his pain is reduced! The economic demand for the Indian film industry is entwined in the spirit of the Indian people, who on one hand are Hindu and cherish the joys of living, and on the other have not come to grips with the fact

of the social reality that the excuses for this pleasure-seeking come from the Indian cinema. That is why this cinema keeps selling dreams and they keep on buying them. They have inverted the dream with the reality. And so if you subject them to a dark film, you've committed some sort of treason against them. Because a dark film won't change anything but make life less endurable to them. That is why I came to accept these beggars of India as my teachers. It's why I've been constantly writing screenplays since. I've written dozens, and set aside most of them. Do you know how many times I rewrote *A Moment of Innocence*? For years I've been struggling with it. Then I read somewhere about the fact that Sepehri had gone to India, and his work was changed immensely by that experience.

[*Sadeq*] *Hedayat travelled to India as well but he ended up committing suicide in Paris.*

But it was a different experience for him—a bad experience. But I . . . well, I ran into moments of enlightenment, almost mystical ones, be they visually inspired, or from books, conversations . . . I wrote a piece which in short is a sort of comparison between three kinds of mysticism: Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu. I contrasted them and tried to see why it is that Hindu mysticism is more

open. It's a mysticism that is close to the people, available to them, has immediate results for them. Why is it that Buddhist mysticism, despite bringing peace to its adherents, is still idealistic? And that Islamic mysticism, well, is just sick? [*Laughs*]

Improvising Dreams

On another topic. Tell me, what changes do you see when you compare your earliest works to your most recent ones in the way you conceptualize the screenplay, how you shoot the screenplay and, finally, how it is edited? That is, have you become more improvisatory—do you try out ideas on the set and in editing that you had not come up with at the screenplay-writing stage?

I'd have to answer that question for each film separately. For *Nasuh's Repentance* I followed my screenplay exactly as I did for *Two Sightless Eyes*. The screenplay for *Seeking Refuge* was almost exactly followed. *Boycott* had some changes made at the editing stage, not in how it was shot. For *The Peddler* I tried out several edits, and, if you look at the published screenplay and the film, there are major differences between them. *The Cyclist* had more improvisations. And *Marriage of the Blessed* had more. In *A Time for Love*, I ended up cutting out a lot of what had been in the screenplay. I rewrote the script for *Once Upon a Time*,

Cinema 13 times . . . 13! So from the original idea to what I ended up with, *Once Upon a Time, Cinema* has probably changed the most. There were endless changes. One day I'd say: 'How many carriages are coming today?' They'd answer: 'Three' and I'd say: 'How many soldiers do we have?' and they'd say: 'Such-and-such a number' and I'd have to adjust the script accordingly. You can never be sure of these sorts of details. [*Laughs*] Also, occasionally one of the actors wouldn't show up, so I'd just give his lines to someone else . . . So, what comes next?

Zayendeh-rood Nights.

Right, *Zayendeh-rood Nights* changed a great deal from the script. The entire outline of the story was redone . . . So you see, each film is different.

Sources of Cultural Maladies

What, in your opinion, is our worst cultural trait?

Iranian society's?

Or Iranian culture's.

There are a few films which have made an excellent critique of certain cultural or social traits of Iranian society. One is the serial *Dear Uncle Napoleon* [based on Iraj

Pezeshkzad's satirical novel], in which the character Da'i Jan Napoleon suspects that his servant Mash Qasem is an English spy. Mash Qasem denies it. I don't know if you remember this?

Oh yes, I do very well. I have read the novel. Never saw the serial. It started when I had left Iran.

Right. My point is that when Mash Qasem sees that his idol believes him to be an English spy, he begins to think that he is one [*laughs*] and confesses! That to me is a metaphor, really, of a condition of Iranian society. I mean, to doubt yourself to the extent where you would begin to believe accusations against you, even of being a spy . . . Spying needs a few things! And we are continually confessing for sins we've not committed. Adam ate the apple, and we cry in his stead. And this is really something that has only been well addressed by a single Iranian film, *Dear Uncle Napoleon*. Iranian society is, unfortunately, immature in this way. People, rather than working hard towards a certain goal, work harder to make sure that others never reach it. This is widespread. We excel at wrestling, more so than soccer . . . because we're individualists! Soccer must be taken seriously as a team sport before a new spirit emerges. Piety must be serious before we can have sufficient religious leaders. But, with us, even

piety is a sort of self-aggrandisement. Unfortunately, as I said, we are a people who are more concerned with what others are doing. So if we notice that someone is doing very well, we work twice as hard to undercut that person so that he does not reach the goal before we do.

Another thing is that we're a nation of swagger and hypocrisy. Even the sickliest heroin user pretends he's a wrestler. In appearance we're all wrestlers, but behind the scenes we're all opium and heroin addicts. It's the same in our political life. These are national traits.

Not to mention that Iran is a such a sexist society. Look at the parliament—what per cent are women? Look at voting—what per cent are women? At work, take a look—how many companies or offices have women directors? The government has a large role to play in this, it has stood in the path of women's progress. Remember, Reza Shah came along and with force instituted certain freedoms for women. He had to use force against society itself to institute these changes. Because sexism is a national cultural trait. To the extent that, in Pakistan, it is possible to imagine a woman as a prime minister. In Iran too . . . And it's not only a question of Islam. Look at Pakistan, look at India—in comparison to them, we're more like Afghanistan in how we view women.

But in my opinion Iran's greatest problem is our belief in singular truths. Everyone believes themselves to be absolutely correct. It's why democracy has been a failure in Iran. Democracy, before being a political issue, is a cultural issue. We all think that we are the only holders of the truth, that everyone should bend to our own views. We have no precedent of public discourse—instead, we have the seat of the cleric from which a monologue is issued. Now, whether this seat is Shamlu or Jalal Al-e Ahmad doesn't make a difference. Can one enter a dialogue with Shamlu? Is this possible? How about Al-e Ahmad? How about Samad Behrangi? These would be one-way conversations. We never have round tables—we only have lecterns. If we can't achieve democracy it's because every person sees himself as the holder of the truth, and not a truth that is a disparate thing, spread out amongst the people. So we cannot enter dialogues. And why is this the case? Because we're stuck believing in prophets of a single book. One ends up a follower of Shamlu, another follows his opposition. But the fact is that truth is not found solely in a single place! Since the scientific base of this nation is quite low, we look for truth in arguing over whether this book will give us the answers or that one. Ignored is the possibility that they both may have some answers. This fundamentalism prevents us

from recognizing the truth, it draws us down a path towards fascism. When all truth is a single thing, and when it is held within the pages of a single book, then there is only one person who can interpret that book—and it becomes a fight between absolutes. And everyone else becomes fighters for whatever sect they follow. So we end up with either Shari'ati or Motahhari, and not simply two opinions. Two voices argue, and the rest pound their chests.

In the book on *Salaam Cinema*, there is a discussion I have—and there it's greatly truncated—where I discuss Iranian intellectuals. I claim that Iran has had no intellectuals. Intellectuals are people who think, consider, analyse. We have people who make statements, who argue. What becomes important is who you follow. These are among the largest problems in Iranian society. For me, everything else is only related to this.

These are cultural problems which have held us back. As the world moved on from the classical era, we did not. We are still in a state preceding humanism, much less modernism, realism. We are stuck in the villages of the classical age. People do sometimes travel around Iran, but those who leave the country and see the outside do not return. How many people do we have who have lived

here for a period, then returned and now play a significant role in Iranian society? None. If these two million who live outside Iran were to return, it would certainly change the nature of Iranian society. Two million can certainly influence 60 million. Travelling is so unheard-of in Iran, even domestically.

Iran, stuck as it has been in a previous era, has in recent years even begun to regress. I think I was telling you this recently—we are still oriented to our ancient past. To be progressive, then, is to be oriented to an era 400 rather than 600 years ago [*Laughs*] . . . This fundamentalism, this hatred of relativism, leads to sexism and other problems I've mentioned. Some think that we need to influence Iranian society, that by publishing books and making films we are making cultural changes. But that's not so. The work of cultural change would be to bring about a revolution where all people would arrive at decisions which may not be related to the aspirations of the revolution, but which would be the natural results of that event. Instead, the atmosphere we live in only confuses people. Since the door to dialogue is closed and we are deprived of basic freedoms, it is quite clear that people are left with little to consider.

This revolution that you would like to see, what would be its basis?

What I'm saying is that this revolution has already taken place. There was a revolution in Iran . . . where aspirations were linked to this revolution. And in the experience everyone has come to certain eventual conclusions. The results of this are around us, this is what we have to show for it. The results haven't been tabulated or, rather, they have been tabulated very incorrectly. But in every person's life, these factors exist . . . but there have not been the conditions for these to have been tabulated collectively.

Can't it be said that Gabbeh *and* Salaam Cinema *are a sort of tabulation?*

No . . . These are my own tabulations, not a collective one.

Well . . . setting aside our ignorance of where in the world we stand, in Iranian culture itself, what traits strike you as positive and which can be used to reform the overall cultural condition?

[*Long pause*] I don't know exactly. In our culture, this tendency to cheating, to lying, has its roots in the fear of the people among the powers-that-be, and this has led to our late arrival at even primitive ideas. Even in day-to-day matters, everything has been polarized, and that results in the perception that cheating is a necessity of life. In my opinion, not only does the government deceive the people but also the people deceive one another, deceive the

government. I remember, in 1978, one day in the month of June, we had just performed a group prayer and the prison guards took us to solitary confinement. In this group, I was with Raja'ian. Then they took Raja'ian and put him into a normal group cell, one with non-political prisoners. How long is it from 10 June 1978 to 10 February 1979 [the day of the final ascendance of the revolution over the provisional government]? When I saw Raja'ian, I asked him: 'What happened?' He said: 'I was in a cell and they brought in a group of new prisoners who told us that their goal was to oust the Shah by the end of the year . . . There were 30 or so of us already in there, and we all began to laugh for several minutes. Then the new prisoners began writing confessions on scraps of paper so as to be released. We told them to have some self-respect, to stay in jail for a few days. They looked at us as if we were crazy and said: "We want to get out as soon as possible so as to overthrow the Shah! Don't you have anything better to do than to rot in jail?"' He then began discussing with the other older prisoners how shallow and disappointing the new political activists were, and how their hopes to overthrow the Shah quickly would lead to their ultimate failure.

You see, even the Shah had no idea what was coming. Do you know why none of us could have predicted

the revolution? Because this populace is so caught up in chest-beating that it is likely to change their affiliations in a moment en masse. Since all political movements are based on deceit, they all run the risk of being overthrown in a moment by a new lie . . . One day the people will pour into the streets to support you, the next week the same people will be in the streets demanding your removal. The public has thus become deceitful even to itself. It has an outer and an inner life. Iranians can only be known by entering their homes, by visiting them inside their homes. This is especially true in the cities—

Wait a minute. When I ask you what the most negative trait of Iranian culture might be, you come up with a list of things. Having asked you for ideas about its emancipation you first say that you don't know and then you begin to speak at greater length about the negative traits. As an Iranian filmmaker, as an artist—

I know, I'm pessimistic—

Listen, as a filmmaker, who has just made a film like Gabbeh—

Emancipation? From what?

From itself! From deceit and lies and misery, and this vicious circle of stupidity and hypocrisy—

From itself? And forget about the political dimension?

No, not at all, precisely in, through and against those conditions.

And set up a framework that ignores the political?

Let me re-state my question. What, morally and intellectually, nourishes you as an artist who is obviously concerned with the fate of our society? For example, for Gabbeh, *a film in celebration of life—what provided the moral and intellectual energy?*

It's hard for me to say. I'm too much inside the matter. I can't offer you some manifesto with a list, one, two, three, of my demands. I can only give you a summary of my feelings about our predicament. I think that the Iranian people need to, on their own and for themselves, come to a more rational, not an emotional, end. The duality, the schizophrenia of Iranians—that they are one thing in public and another in private—is because our national character has not yet been fully constituted. One can be happy, but one cannot yet be sure that one is happy because of an innate inner joy. The fact is, I see this as a right—I think that it is a human right to be joyful. That person who makes a dark and realistic film in India is wasting his time. Gandhi, in the large scheme of things, did very little. Socialism has also failed. Many things must yet change in India before people's lives become better. So why should people have to be beaten down with movies like that? They must be allowed to have some

pleasures in life. The person who has had to sell his body for a morsel of food—you want to make a film for him about social justice? What is he supposed to do after seeing that film? Kill the guy sitting next to him? It's way too simplistic to see films as answering these questions. These problems are so complex.

I am moved by the problems of humanity, you know, and the meaning of life to me is not only just in living but also in living for everyone else . . . That's called humanity. However, these problems don't have clear-cut answers . . .

One of the things I am trying to do is this: that in a society which has individualistic and fundamentalist tendencies, I try to speak of relativism. As for anyone who thinks of following me instead of some others, I will do all I can to break that so that they don't blindly follow me. I teach thinking, thinking for one's self, and I don't want any followers. In conclusion, I, in choosing from among religion, politics and art, choose art. In the same sense that art has instructed and educated me, I feel that my own responsibility is to continue to educate myself through art, since it is in being educated through art that I will become more knowledgeable . . . And in my work—a viewer who is in contact with a work of mine for an hour and a half, during this time, to a small extent, will

breathe in an air which is somewhat different than that in which he or she lives . . . If successful, this will be no more than a very small, almost insignificant, achievement. I don't believe that what I am doing can really be considered very significant. But I can do nothing else, and I can't do nothing. But the significance of what I do is not that important to me . . . its nature, its quality is what is important to me. My influence is small, and I influence no one more than I influence myself. But, naturally, some people are affected by what I do. In the same way that I am affected by Sepehri. And perhaps some people will be affected by those whom I affect.

But I don't think that I am in any way changing the world. Any person who has tried to take the responsibility of the world upon himself has done nothing but corrupt the world in the end. Instead, I critique myself every day, I try to break myself every day . . . I am a filmmaker, and I hope that nothing I say will ever lead to a person killing someone, nor to someone being killed in defending what I have said. A single human's life is still more valuable to me than all of cinema. We filmmakers are here only to illuminate, to bring joy to life. All I seek is that, in leaving a film of mine, a person feel a little happier, act with a little more kindness in the world. I don't think that cinema can hope to do much more. But even this little is enough

to fulfil my ambitions . . . and these ambitions of mine are to a great extent due to historical circumstances. I aspire to be a real person, rather than to represent some ideal . . . and that's why my films tend to be more realistic rather than idealistic. Although, certainly, idealism is part of the reality of life and its joys and pains.

Speaking of religion—I accept God, in my heart, personally. But I would never want to try to persuade someone else to accept Him. This is a personal matter. Those things which attract you and me to the world are the details of living. These prophets, these religions, all have come to tell us just that. When I was a child, when I started going to the mosque, I wanted to save humanity. After getting a little older, I wanted to save my country. Now, I think, I make films in order to save myself. With films, I can create a representation of myself which I can then examine, and say: 'Where have I come to now?' I can see where I have problems, what things I wish to change about myself. I make mirrors, then, to see myself. For example, when I watch *The Peddler*, when I see that a sheep is slaughtered in the film, I become enraged at myself. I begin to wonder if the film was worth the life of that one sheep. Or in *Boycott*, when someone plucks the wings off a butterfly. I go mad when I see that. I hate it. I edited it out. Not that I'm not committing injustices every

day. By simply walking, I kill numerous ants. What I'm saying, though, is that I am interested in changing myself rather than anyone else. Not that I'm against others changing. I just don't know what the truth is—so how can I act as a soothsayer and try to convince others to change?

A wonderful saying is one which claims that truth is a mirror that fell from the hand of God. Every person picked up a piece of it, and, seeing his or her reflection, decided that the truth was what they each held rather than realizing that the truth had become fragmented amongst them all. In my opinion, everyone is confronted by their own specific truth, and there is no need to be too worried about that. People who live under all sorts of stress and tribulations get by and go on living. I simply want people to have hope while they live. And each person can choose his or her own method of living.

Shamlu has a poem, 'This long road . . . with all of this faith in one's own road'. Each person should have faith in his or her own road. I don't want to tell anyone to follow mine, to waste people's time with my opinions. A friend of mine once said that certain poets waste the time of words. I replied that certain clerics waste the time of knowledge. And revolutionaries waste people's time.

People will find their own ways. There is a guy you can hear when he calls out his wares in the street. He sells trinkets. Occasionally, he swindles a couple of people, and is himself swindled from time to time. At night, he goes home, takes food for his children, sleeps beside his neighbours. He lives in the depths of reality. For him, life is about washing a dish. About being a small store owner, about working for a pittance. It's all of those things that are worth going for. That's all.

[An earlier version of this interview appeared in my *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, Future* (London: Verso, 2001).]

CHILDREN OF ADAM, PARENTS OF EVE

When UNESCO gave Makhmalbaf its Federico Fellini award for Kandahar, *it also commissioned him to make a short documentary on the plight of Afghan children. By mid-October 2001, Makhmalbaf was in an Afghan refugee camp in Zahedan, on the border between Iran and Afghanistan, shooting that documentary.* The Afghan Alphabet *(2002) was the result of that trip. While he was in Zahedan, I conducted the following telephone interview with him from New York on Saturday, 27 October 2001.*

HAMID DABASHI (NEW YORK): *Given the periodization and categories that you usually make of your films, how do you categorize* Kandahar? *Does it fit somewhere in the conception of your cinema as we understand it now, or did you make it specifically to address the predicament of Afghanistan, irrespective of where it fits in your oeuvre?*

MOHSEN MAKHMALBAF (ZAHEDAN): The story began about a couple of years ago when an Afghan refugee woman came to our office in Tehran. Nelofer Pazira. She was interested in entering Afghanistan. She had just received a letter from her friend, informing her that she could no longer tolerate the circumstances imposed on Afghan women in Afghanistan and wanted to commit suicide. Ms Pazira told me, 'Since you have already made a film about the predicament of Afghan refugees in Iran [*The Cyclist*, 1987], I have come to you. If you like, you can come with me to Afghanistan and, with a digital camera, make a clandestine film about the situation.' That was the initial spark. Then I began to research more extensively and made a secret trip into Afghanistan, just to see the situation first-hand.

I was utterly shocked when I entered Afghanistan. More than anything else, it was the unfathomable degree of hunger that paralysed me. In the vicinity of the city of Herat, I saw more than 20,000 people dying on the streets and highways—their deaths entirely due to famine, to hunger. I read about 10,000 pages of books and articles about Afghanistan. Then I travelled extensively along the Iran–Afghanistan border and visited the refugee camps of the Afghans coming into Iran, many of them having walked over minefields in order to get there.

Inside Afghanistan, I saw many legless people. When I did more research, I found out that, over the last 20 years, about two and a half million people have been killed in Afghanistan, while another six and a half have been made into refugees—that is to say, some 10 per cent have died and another 30 per cent made into refugees. It suddenly hit me that our neighbour has lost about 40 per cent of its population! And just because our mass media is oblivious to it, even in Iran, let alone the world at large, we have remained totally ignorant of their disastrous predicament. Of course, the world will pay no attention to them because the global media is indifferent to the Afghans.

This was my initial motive in making this film. When I started making it, it was the first and only project where I didn't feel that I was making a film but that, in fact, I was using the means of cinema in order to inform the world of a tragedy. Because, before September the Eleventh, nobody cared or talked about Afghanistan. *Kandahar* is the only film ever made about the situation inside Afghanistan. The handful of other films made worldwide about Afghanistan are more about the predicament of the Afghan refugees outside Afghanistan or the reflection of the Russians on their occupation of Afghanistan or about the struggle of the Mujahideen

against the Russians. As for the situation under the Taliban—except for a few documentaries, there is no feature film whatsoever. I tried to use this film as a means of providing the world with an alternative, humanitarian, picture of the catastrophe that had befallen some 20 million people.

Even though, as you said, you were attracted to this film for humanitarian reasons, one can still see the stylistic traces of your earlier films in it. How much of this film is due to the specific conditions of Afghanistan, to which you were drawn for humanitarian reasons, and how much because of your own creative interventions as a filmmaker—a filmmaker, I might add, with a specific cinematic vocabulary?

Well, as for its relation to reality—all those who have acted in this film are Afghans and the American character is also really an American. All the actors are real people. As for the location—although the film was made at the border, it is exactly like the locations I scouted within Afghanistan. They are exactly identical. Within about a kilometre's distance, we would be inside Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. All the costumes are real items, either worn by the Afghan refugees or items that I smuggled out of Afghanistan. All the events that you see in *Kandahar* are either those that I have witnessed with my

own eyes or heard with my own ears. The only fictional scene is that of the artificial legs falling from the sky, although even that is in a way real because I have seen them dropping food from the sky. Right now, as you know, the Americans are mixing their bombs with bread—something I have called 'Bomb Sandwich'. I have seen many things fall from the sky. I have even heard that, at some point, they were dropping books from the sky. All kinds of things, really, all kinds of droppings from the sky. But in my film, this appears as a satire, as a kind of dream.

Obviously, so far as the cinematic aspects of *Kandahar* are concerned, things such as framing, camera-work, *mise-en-scène*, etc., they all, as you say, come from my specific cinematic style. *Kandahar* is, in fact, a combination of reality and my cinematic experiments. But the fact is that I have tried to make this film like a *reportage*, giving a report of a forgotten people. Contrary to Marshall McLuhan, who believes that the mass media has turned the world into a small village, I believe that politics can still determine who can enter this global image and who cannot. If it was really the case that the mass media has turned the world into a global village, how then can Afghanistan be so utterly forgotten over the last two decades, especially the last 10 years? And yet, suddenly

after the destruction of two buildings in New York, it re-enters the global village and becomes the top news item in the world? This exiting and entering the global village has nothing to do with mass media but everything to do with the politics behind the mass media. Precisely for that reason—having decided now that the mass media is ignorant, or, more accurately, that the politics behind the mass media prevent this human catastrophe from being noted by the global audience—I thought of making this film. I knew that, because of my limited reputation, it would be screened in film festivals throughout the world, be seen in many countries. I thought of making this film as an instrument to inform the global audience. But, of course, I remain a filmmaker and, even when I report on reality, I use the cinematic medium, I decide on the framing, location, narrative plot, etc. The result is the narration of reality through cinema, predicated on the experiences of an Iranian filmmaker living next door to Afghanistan, a filmmaker who is influenced more by the tragedy that has befallen this nation than by cinema per se, the tragedy of a people among who, every single day, around seven to ten lose their legs, inadvertently walking on a mine. A people who, for the last 20 years, even before the start of this war, lost someone every five minutes to hunger or to a war. A people who, again over the last 20 years, had

someone turn into a refugee every other minute. When you face a tragedy like this, then cinema *qua* cinema loses its significance. This, of course, remains a film that I made but it is more a film that the Afghan tragedy has made.

How much of the script of Kandahar *did you write before you started shooting and how much did you improvise? When you were on location, how much did you change or modify your script under the influence of the conditions you were filming in?*

I had determined the general outline of the plot before shooting, in fact right from that very first spark of the idea. But, in the course of making the film, I did make certain improvisations. For example, the woman who was sitting behind the curtain with her child—they had, purely by accident, just arrived from Afghanistan, and on her skin, the skin of the woman who was sitting there before Nelofer, the scars of hunger and famine were evident. At times, a certain character imposed herself on the story because of the surrounding realities. Yet there were also scenes that I wanted to shoot but the conditions weren't suitable—my shooting was interrupted on the grounds that my film might generate sympathy for the Afghan refugees, and this was at a time when officials in Iran believed that the Afghan refugees should leave the coun-

try because of the severe unemployment rate inside the Iranian economy. For this reason, the authorities in Iran prevented me from making my film for a while. But, fortunately, the Iranian parliament intervened and I could resume. Subsequently, I tried to avoid any political implications in my film because I was really after the humanitarian dimensions of these tragedies.

In short, I could not make certain sections that I wanted to, and, conversely, certain other sections were improvised because of the immediate surroundings of the location. For example, I could not enter Afghanistan because the Taliban did not allow me in. Even Mr Kamal Hussein, the UN human rights representative in Afghanistan, could not secure me a visa. The Pakistani government was against it. I wasn't allowed to bring those colourful buses that run between Pakistan and Afghanistan into Iran. Many, many problems. I even had problems with the Afghans themselves, who were reluctant to appear in front of the camera. The Afghan women were not ready to appear in front of the camera even with the burqa. Even today, in Zahedan, just before you called, when I went to a first-grade classroom for Afghan girls and wanted to shoot a scene with a little Afghan girl, she was reluctant to tell me her name—she was worrying about someone taking her picture even though she was

under the burqa. So, in effect, cultural and political problems, exacerbated by famine in the refugee camps, eliminated certain sections of my film and created certain others.

Over the last few years, a number of films have been made in Iran about the Afghans. In addition to your Kandahar, *we have Majid Majidi's* Baran (2001), *Hasan Yektapanah's* Jom'eh (2000), *even your own previous film on the Afghan refugees,* The Cyclist (1987). *Why do you think that there have been so many films about Afghanistan made in Iran, and what do you think is the difference between your two and the others? In fact, what is the difference between the first film you made about the Afghans in 1987 and the one you just made in 2001? What were your own feelings when you were making* The Cyclist *as opposed to when you were making* Kandahar?

The assumption that there are many films made about Afghanistan is not correct. The reason is this: throughout the world, every year, about 2,000–3,000 feature films are made. Given that Afghanistan is one of the 200 countries in the world, then at least one two-hundredth of global cinematic productions ought to be about it. But, over the last 20 years that this country has been in the grip of war, famine and global negligence, only nine films have been made about it—half a film per year. The question then is

this: is Afghanistan's fair share as one of the 200 nations of the world only half a film per year?

The next point is this: of these films that you say have been made about Afghanistan, one is *Rambo in Afghanistan*, which has absolutely nothing to do with Afghanistan. It is a ridiculous, cliché-ridden film, made in Hollywood, with only one back-projected scene shot in Peshawar in Pakistan and entirely irrelevant to Afghanistan itself. There are three films made by Russians as part of their reflections on their occupation of Afghanistan. There are three more that the Afghan Mujahideen have made which are, in effect, epic films, full of propaganda clichés. And there are four others. One is *The Cyclist*, which I made about 13 years ago about the predicament of Afghan refugees in Iran; one is [Hasan Yektapanah's] *Jom'eh* and the other [Majid Majidi's] *Baran*. They second and third are both about Afghan refugees in the context of a love story. And the fourth is *Kandahar*. This is the most serious film about the situation inside Afghanistan over the last seven years, since the Taliban took over.

The most important difference is that all other films are about the situation of Afghans *outside* Afghanistan. This one is about the catastrophe *inside* the country. The second difference is that, in all the other films, an Afghan

character is the narrative occasion of the plot; the situation of Afghanistan as a whole is not the subject. In *Kandahar*, I have tried not to have any specific hero. The hero of *Kandahar* is the people of Afghanistan, of whom 10 per cent have died over the last 20 years and another 30 per cent have been made into refugees. In other words, *Kandahar* deals with the devastated soul of a nation, of a country where no building stands intact in its cities. Because of a geography in which about 75 per cent of the land is mountain terrain, and no major highway connections, no town life has ever been cultivated in Afghanistan. Whatever limited town life existed before the last 20 years has been destroyed by the Soviet occupation, by the civil war and now by this American invasion. Afghanistan is, in effect, an utterly devastated and deserted land, and so is the soul of its nation. I have thus tried to portray the devastated, hopeless, soul of a nation, particularly that of its women, whereas the other films with an Afghan character in them are about things like a man who wants to marry a woman or find a job and cannot do so. In them, only the problem of one Afghan person is highlighted and not the collective soul of a nation, afflicted by the tragedy of fundamentalism, war and famine.

Kandahar *was premiered last May in Cannes. Now it has assumed an entirely different significance, as we witness in its*

reception in Europe, particularly in Italy, where as you said some 80 movie theatres have screened it. How do you see the difference between the initial reaction of people to your film and its reception after the events of September the Eleventh and the subsequent American invasion of Afghanistan on October the Seventh?

In the same way that before September the Eleventh, nobody talked about the tragedy in Afghanistan. Some reporters in Cannes were telling me: 'There are so many issues and problems in the world, why have you turned your attention to a minor issue like Afghanistan?' Even in Iran people were asking me: 'Why have you abandoned your own country and its problems? Why are you making a film about another country?' For them, the issue itself was not particularly serious. This is really critical, because it seems that things are important only if the mass media decides they are so. And if the media, in its so-called small global village, decides to eliminate an entire nation, then it can eliminate even the discussion of that nation. Before September the Eleventh, I remember, in Cannes, I used to say to the reporters: 'Forget about this film, let's just talk about this forgotten tragedy.' On many occasions, I remember bursting into tears during my interviews. It baffles some people that I am so sensitive about this issue. But notice, how, after September the Eleventh, the whole world is talking about Afghanistan, non-stop.

The reason for this is: if the United States is afflicted with a problem, then that problem will have to be a global issue. But if some other country produces six and a half million refugees and two and a half million of its population wither away—that can easily be forgotten, even by its own neighbouring country, Iran. After two buildings collapse in the United States—and there's no question it was a tragedy, and a global tragedy, but so is Afghanistan, a global tragedy that has been forgotten—suddenly *Kandahar* has become very important. This is because of two reasons. First: because Afghanistan has become the top news in the world, and, second: because we have no independent source of information about the tragedy of Afghanistan, and *Kandahar* provides an alternative view to the one we receive from the mass media, a view that draws global attention to the immeasurable hunger, disease and destitution that has engulfed an entire nation.

The reason that I hear some politicians are interested in seeing my film is that they are fighting with a country of which they have no conception. In the world we live in, one either has to have economic incentives to be interested in a country. Like the attention Kuwait received when Iraq invaded it—because of its oil, the Americans attacked and, in a matter of days, expelled the Iraqis. Or it has to pose a threat in order to attract attention. I think that,

despite so many artists and journalists, and so many claims to humanitarian concerns, Afghanistan was never a point of attention because of humanitarianism. It was only after September the Eleventh, only because the US is the only superpower in the world and it was afflicted with a tragedy, for that reason and for that reason alone was attention drawn to Afghanistan and to my film. Now, of course, as Kamal Hussein put it, is the best time to disseminate news about the tragedy of Afghanistan. It is now or never. As he said, 'For 10 years I was reporting to the UN about the Afghan predicament, and even there I couldn't find anybody to pay any attention to my reports.' But, right now, everyone is reporting about Afghanistan.

The result is that about 40 countries have so far purchased *Kandahar*. Almost all the major film festivals around the world are going to screen it. In my own country, it was screened at the same time as it was in Cannes, though only in two theatres, while in Italy alone it started in 24 theatres and now has gone on to about 80. Today I heard that, over the last two days, it has received record attention in France. This is our world, the world that one day decides to forget about something altogether and the next day insists on paying it particular attention. I hope this is not just a fad, that two months from now both the television audience and the cinema audience won't get

tired of the subject and move on to some other that tickles their fancy.

To what do you attribute this lack of attention to the predicament of millions of Afghans before September the Eleventh, and this sudden attention to your film by way of seeking alternative sources of knowledge and reflection about Afghanistan? How long do you think this attention to Afghanistan will last?

In my judgement, this is the collapse of the very idea of humanity. I remember, about three to four decades ago, when we were children, famine had devastated Africa and the radio and the television constantly talked about helping the famine-stricken Africans. But, before September the Eleventh, even Iranian television referred to the Afghan refugees as a bunch of smugglers and unwanted guests. I had to write a letter to the Iranian President, telling him that, according to the UN statistics, about three million Afghans were in danger of starvation inside Afghanistan and that if we were to expel the two and a half million Afghans who were in Iran, it would be like dispatching five and a half million people to the dining table of death.

Today, the situation is not much different. Last night, the UN human rights representative in Afghanistan visited me in Tehran and told me that, right now, about six mil-

lion Afghans are in danger of starvation. Yet all we hear is about terrorism, about Bin Laden, about cruise missiles. The price of every cruise missile, I hear, is about two million dollars, whereas I have calculated that it takes only 15 dollars to educate an Afghan child in Iran. From the proceeds of *Kandahar* and the royalties of an essay I wrote when I was making it, 'The Statues of Buddha Were Not Destroyed . . .', we are hiring teachers. We hire one teacher for every 20 Afghan kids, and for about five months they are taught the first grade. The cost of this is about 40 dollars a month—we pay a teacher 200 dollars to teach 20 children. The cost of the teacher comes down to about 10 dollars per student, and about another five dollars for books and stationery. So I sat down and calculated that for every cruise missile that the Americans fire at the Afghans, about 130,000 Afghan kids can be educated. Just this one item of comparison is enough to see to what depth humanity has collapsed.

In addition, in my judgement, this entire war on Afghanistan is really a fare for selling firearms. Just as after I make a film, I look for a film festival to present and launch it, so is it with the arms industry. Over the last decade, the market for arms has declined in the world. It seems that new weapons have been made. That's why every day when we read the news, especially in Europe,

the press gives us the details of the destructive power of the weapons the Americans are using. It's as if we were watching an arms fare for weapons, their size, calibre and firepower. This entire war appears to me to be an exhibition for destructive weapons. The arms industry, especially the Western arms industry, is in need of a show in order to exhibit its latest products. Otherwise it is utterly stupid militarily to attack a country which has absolutely nothing to lose.

Plus, the woman who is hiding behind a burqa will not be liberated by having cruise missiles shot at her. First, she will have to be educated. The first problem that Afghanistan faces is hunger, then illiteracy. A hungry and illiterate nation is being attacked in the name of war on terrorism. The angry and frightened United States has attacked a hungry and illiterate country, attacked it ruthlessly. In my judgement, this military madness has to come to an end—except that the United States seems to be after military bases and uses this concept of war against terrorism as a subterfuge. This has nothing to do with Afghanistan but everything to do with New York, with the United States, with terrorism. It has nothing to do with a people of whom approximately six million are about to perish from hunger.

I believe that the tragedy of Afghanistan continues to be forgotten. Afghanistan is now only the object of a contrived attention. Perhaps because the United States has to blame someone else for its domestic problems, perhaps because we're used to blaming external enemies for our internal problems, or because we blow up a minor issue so far out of proportion that we forget that humans are humans. About two and a half million people have perished in Afghanistan. That is a tragedy. A few thousand people have been killed in New York. That is a tragedy. They are both tragedies. But why is it that we opt to be silent about one, while in retaliation for the other we wreak havoc on a nation? Do the spirits of those people who perished in the New York tragedy concur with so much aggravated crime perpetrated against innocent people in order to avenge their blood?

Our world is more in need of Gandhi than of Bush. But for Bush this is a historic opportunity. Now that the world's attention is on Afghanistan, where the marriage between poverty and ignorance has resulted in fundamentalism, this is a Gandhian opportunity for him to use the political and economic means at his disposal to change the situation in Afghanistan. I believe that the most important long-term project in Afghanistan is to make it participate in the global economy. The Iranians

have their oil to sell—the Afghans have nothing. That's why war is a national occupation. Afghanistan is a country which produces a little opium, which traffics in drugs, with millions of refugees seeking employment in other countries. As a result, it has turned war into a source of national employment. If peace is to return to this region, if the seeds of fundamentalism are not to grow in Afghanistan, and from there spread to its neighbouring countries in the Middle East, it is the Afghan economy that will have to be changed. A bomb will never satisfy hunger, nor will it cure illiteracy.

This particular attention from the world is curiously similar to that global negligence—it is more a marketing strategy to sell these new and sophisticated weapons, and, even more, an indication of America's incompetence in managing its own domestic affairs. How come when I, a filmmaker and a guest of American film festivals, arrive in the United States, they investigate, fingerprint and humiliate me just like a common thief and a criminal but they can't control the aircraft that are flying in their own skies and prevent them from causing catastrophic damage? This is an indication of nothing except the fact that the United States, the single most important global power today, is so ignorant of its own situation that it has become increasingly vulnerable. But this vulnerability,

more than anything else, is because of its negligence of humanitarian issues. The mass media has failed to turn the world into a global village, but Sa'di's poem continues to define humanity in a single stroke:

> *All children of Adam are parts of the same body,*
> *For in their creation they are made of the same substance.*
> *When a human part is sick and afflicted,*
> *The other parts are equally troubled.*

Just as we saw: when Afghanistan produced six and a half million refugees and two and a half million of its people perished, then a small part of New York, just like a cell on the body of humanity, was also afflicted. This could also be considered a wake-up call. We cannot continue to live in the opulent and all-powerful USA and forget that if AIDS comes from Africa then it can threaten us too. If fundamentalism is shaped in the East, it can equally mesmerize the simple-minded Americans so thoroughly that they too in their multitudes become naïve fundamentalists, with the same kinds of fundamentalist relations with the mass media that simple-minded Afghans have with Bin Laden and Mullah Omar.

After UNESCO gave you the Fellini Award for Kandahar *in Paris, I understand that you initiated a fund to benefit the Afghan refugees. Could you explain that further?*

That's right. As you know the UNESCO award was not monetary—just an honour that I was very pleased that *Kandahar* received. But I made a commitment: when Afghanistan is freed, I will build a school in Kandahar. I'll call it the Federico Fellini School, and give this prize on behalf of UNESCO to the students of that school. We've also started a series of actions in collaboration with UNICEF for the education of Afghan children. UNICEF is trying to establish schools for about 500,000 Afghan kids among the refugees who are perfectly capable of being educated but who, because of financial and legal obstacles, cannot be so. In various Iranian cities, towns and villages, these schools are to be established and staffed. Right now, I am making a documentary about educating the Afghan kids. We also gave financial support to UNICEF. Last year, as I was making *Kandahar*, we tried to educate about 100 of these kids. This year, we are trying to increase that to 2,000 children. But the conditions are far worse than we can handle. Within Afghanistan, children are fed and brainwashed inside the Taliban-controlled system. The situation in Iran is slightly better. If they are not expelled, we can mobilize and help UNICEF to prevent the continuation of this catastrophe to future generations.

Ms Marisa Berenson gave you the Fellini Award in Paris. I know that she is a distinguished actress and that she is a Goodwill Ambassador and Artist for Peace active on behalf of UNESCO. But her other relation to the events of the last few weeks is that her sister, Ms Barry Berenson Hopkins, was among the passengers of one of the planes that was hijacked and crashed into the World Trade Center. Tell me more about her reactions to the events of September the Eleventh.

By far one of the most memorable events of my life has been meeting with Ms Marisa Berenson. When she gave me the Fellini Award, with a calm composure I had never seen in any human being who herself was in mourning, she said that she believed her sister's death was the most important event of her life. That she believed her sister died in order to bring global attention to the fate of millions of voiceless and faceless Afghan women. That her sister's spirit and those of all the other innocent victims of this tragedy were now hovering over the globe, bringing the world's attention to the fate of the poor and the sick, the forgotten and the abandoned, in Afghanistan. This was by far the noblest reaction that one could expect from a soul of civility and one I still want to associate with the best among Americans.

In Afghanistan, we are facing a catastrophe of immeasurable proportion. What a difference between the

reaction that I saw from Ms Berenson and the reaction of the American government, wreaking havoc on a multitude of destitution and hunger, illiteracy and backwardness! The American government is making a mockery of the very idea of humanitarian aid. If what it is doing in Afghanistan is humanitarian and for the benefit of the Afghans, then how come it did nothing for the last seven years when the Taliban were tyrannizing the Afghans? Is terrorism an enemy that threatens the United States alone, or is it a kind of militant fundamentalism that threatens humanity at large? Why should we not oppose violence itself as the very source of terrorism? Why is it that only when something threatens the United States that we consider it terrorism? Have the people of Afghanistan who are suffering under the Taliban not been subject to terrorism? Did they not deserve the mass media's attention? When Afghans were being hanged in stadiums in front of children, when the Taliban were beheading people, cutting off people's hands—were they not suffering under the rule of terrorists? How come Pakistan, the chief force behind bringing the Taliban to power, is not only not punished by the United States but encouraged and rewarded by the Bush administration?

When I was about to make *Kandahar*, I met with the Pakistan ambassador to Iran. I asked him to give me a

visa to go to Pakistan. But he would not; he told me that they were the supporters of the current regime in Afghanistan and that the Taliban was, in fact, a regiment of their armed forces. His objection to me was, 'Your film apparently is against the Taliban.' I told him, 'The UN human rights representative in Afghanistan has recommended me to you.' He told me that the UN had no credibility with the Pakistan government, and he added that if I had gone there on my own credentials I was more credible to them than the UN. When the Pakistan ambassador to Iran officially and openly supports the Taliban, when even now that they want to talk to the Taliban all the emissaries are from Pakistan, then why should all other countries be forced into an alliance with the US while all the Pakistan debts to the US are forgiven?

Pakistan will have to be examined closely among the regional developments that have resulted in the rise of terrorism. It is a country that, more than half a century ago, precisely because of a contemporary brand of fundamentalism, seceded from Gandhi's democratic movement. It is a country with a population of about 130–140 million people that brandishes about 50–60 million firearms. It is a country that sells its military services to the United States, in the same way that Iran sells oil. It is a country always on the lookout for a crisis in the region so as to

market its military services. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Pakistani army was, in effect, a regiment of the United States forces in the region, providing its military services in order to fund its national budget. And, since the rise of Gorbachev and the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has always needed regional crises to keep its military services marketable. It created the Taliban about seven years ago. It established and financed the Taliban schools where they collected poor and hungry Afghans, trained them militarily and brainwashed them ideologically, then sent them back as peacekeepers to Afghanistan. And when they eliminated all their rivals, they created a tyrannical regime called the Taliban which, at the very least, benefited from the silence, if not the active support, of the United States. The United States right now is ready to eliminate the current Taliban and create yet another, renewed and improved, version of it.

The Pakistan government is in the business of creating and selling mercenaries. It created the Taliban and got reimbursed by the United States. It dispatched them to Afghanistan and sold them and got paid again. It built nuclear weapons and was subjected to economic embargo, then it sold the Taliban and its embargo is lifted. This is the Pakistan which has to be held accountable as a country that has nuclear weapons, with which it is even threat-

ening the West, according to reports both in Europe and within Pakistan itself. Yet nobody pays any attention to Pakistan, while Afghanistan, a devastated and ruined country, is suddenly attacked as a target of terrorism.

I believe that Ms Berenson is far more representative of the soul of what I consider to be America than those who advocate and implement military solutions for economic and cultural problems. In Afghanistan, even before the Taliban took control, about 95 per cent of women and 80 per cent of men did not attend school. When a nation is so deeply afflicted with the chronic diseases of hunger and illiteracy, we need to feed and educate them, to bring them back into the core of human civility and progress. As I said in Paris when *Kandahar* received the Fellini Award, if the world had dropped books instead of bombs over these people, and planted wheat instead of mines in their fields, then today Afghanistan would be afflicted neither with hunger and death nor with fundamentalism. Plus: aren't women in Saudi Arabia under the burqa? As for fundamentalism, aren't thieves' hands cut off in Saudi Arabia? So wherever there is oil, we should look the other way and pretend nothing is wrong, and wherever is poor, weak and defenceless suddenly becomes the target of a global condemnation, and from the worst angle of the issue at that?

In your judgement, what should one realistically expect to be the reaction of the American people to this tragedy, when on the one hand their elected officials are directly responsible for much catastrophe that has happened in the region—in Palestine, in Lebanon, in Sudan, in Iraq, in Iran, in Afghanistan, etc.—and yet they are a people deeply wounded by a tragic carnage against civilian targets, against innocent people who cannot and should not be held responsible for the action of their government? Between these two polar opposites, what do you think the reaction of ordinary Americans should be?

I think that when a person is frightened and angered, he ought to act and not react. If you are frightened and threatened and you react, you will fall into an even deeper and more pernicious trap. Today, I was interviewing the Afghan children refugees here in Zahedan. Everyone I asked about why they had fled from Afghanistan said they were escaping from war. I said: 'What war?' They said: 'The war with the Americans.' I said to them: 'The Americans invaded only last month. You have had civil war for many years.' Just in the course of the last month, the wrongheaded American policies and actions have totally eradicated the memory of the Soviet occupation and the Afghan civil war. They have turned 20 years of war memory against themselves.

I genuinely believe that the Western civilization is worth much more than for such military actions to be its symbolic representative. The same is true about the Eastern and the Islamic civilization, far deeper and complex than to be represented by Mullah Omar or Bin Laden. Neither is the West represented by the American invasion of Afghanistan nor is Islam by Mullah Omar and Bin Laden. Yes, there has been a history of the Crusades. But a return to the Crusades is a return to a historical period of reactionary barbarism, an infantile period for humanity. More than 20 centuries into the recorded history of our civilizations, are we now again to respond to violence with violence? Are we to ignore all the cultural, economic and propaganda factors, and not see how they are blatantly lying to the world? The fact is that, through Pakistan, the US has always been present in Afghanistan. Before September the Eleventh, the Taliban were, in fact, the custodians of the Western interests in Afghanistan, particularly the interest of the Americans. It is true that certain elements within the West have supported the Northern Alliance, but paramount in their calculation has been not the fate of the Afghan people but their own strategic interest. In my judgement, the American people ought to distance their position from their government's, the same way that the people of Afghanistan ought to dis-

tance their predicament from the interests of the Taliban. In every country, the ordinary people and the intellectuals ought to distance their positions from their governments that mutate the enduring interests of their nation into their own limited interests.

Could you tell me where exactly are you now and what are you doing?

Right now, I am in Zahedan, tomorrow I am going to Zabol. By the day after tomorrow, I will be at the border, at the ground zero of the Iran–Afghanistan border. I am making a documentary film about the schools that UNICEF has made possible for the Afghan children refugees, as well as schools that have been created by Iranians, some of which in fact we have made possible.

By we *you mean the Makhmalbaf Film House, correct?—you and your family?*

Right. I'm making a short documentary about how this schooling of the young refugee children is progressing. As I said, the most important thing I encountered today was with a young Afghan girl, about nine years old, who was keeping a very tight veil while attending school. She would neither tell me her name nor would she uncover herself in front of me in that dark room, and yet she was

determined to attend the school and learn to read and write. This is the whole culture. When a nine-year-old girl is petrified that she might burn in hell if she were to tell her name and unveil herself in front of a strange man, how can you change her by bombing her? She needs to be educated. She has to experience how as an Afghan woman she can be socialized, first by education and literacy and then by experiences of socialization. Otherwise, at the age of nine, she will enter the harem of an old Afghan man and to the end of her life will know nothing of being a woman except being a passive object of sexual intercourse.

The cultural problem, especially that of women in Afghanistan, is a little more complicated and deep-rooted than to be addressed by bombing Afghanistan or even changing the Taliban. You cannot modernize Afghanistan by bombing it. To begin with, over the last 20 years it is not just the buildings of Afghanistan that have been left in ruins—the very soul of this nation has been destroyed. Today, again, I was asking members of various ethnic groups in the classroom—Uzbeks, Tajiks, Pashtuns, Hazaras—'When you grow up, will you marry a member of another group?' They all said: 'No!' I asked them: 'Whose tribe is the best?' They all believed that their tribe was. Ethnic tribalism, directly rooted in illiteracy, is so

deep-rooted that, even if you change the Taliban, you can't produce a new government by categorically relying on people's choice. When a people have not yet been through the most basic stages of a public education, they cannot understand even the concept of political participation.

I believe that fundamentalism can destroy two buildings in New York. We have also seen that the outbreak of an epidemic disease, such as influenza, in Afghanistan can spread all over the region, even come to our country. Here in Iran, a few years ago, in order to prevent the spread of polio we had to vaccinate the Afghan children inside Afghanistan. I believe that the world today has to consider Afghanistan a poor and illiterate country that is like an afflicted organ in the human body. If through economic and cultural programmes the predicament of Afghanistan is not directly addressed, then this particular organ of the global body will continue to generate microbes and viruses and endanger the entire life of humanity. It is simply astonishing that, in the age of mass media, in the twenty-first century, a kind of fundamentalism takes shape that you would expect of the Mediaeval and Dark Ages. I believe that with regard to Afghanistan, first and foremost the bombing will have to be stopped immediately. Then I believe that a political solution will have to be found, and, through pressure on the Pakistan

government in particular, a national government will have to be placed in power, a national government that at the beginning may not be exactly the direct choice of the Afghan people. But immediately after a short transitional period, in which people are educated into their most basic civil responsibilities, they will participate in their own government.

But this is after Afghans are at least given their birth certificates. The Afghan people, would you believe it, still don't have birth certificates. This, I think, is the strangest thing in a country in this day and age. Can you imagine people not having birth certificates? When they are made into refugees, if they are lucky, their refugee cards are the first evidence of their identity that they receive. When Afghans are inside Afghanistan, they don't consider themselves Afghans but as Pashtun, Hazara, Tajik or Uzbek. It's only after they are made into refugees, when with denigration and humiliation they are called 'Hey you, Afghani!' that they realize their collective identity. Imagine the first and only conception of your identity being formed through denigration and as a refugee. The first thing that this people need is close attention paid to their predicament. Then, over a period of 10–15 years, through economic and cultural means, we can expect to start to change Afghanistan. Otherwise, it is not just the

buildings of New York that are in danger. Every day, in every city, a young man who is hungry and who has been brainwashed can find his way to paradise by blowing up a building.

You don't usually make documentaries. Are you sure this will be a documentary, or will it too turn into a feature film like your other films?

I really don't know now. Because I always start from reality. Then, gradually, the visual motifs themselves begin to pave my way.

Given the fact that, right now, most of your time is no longer devoted to your film Kandahar *but, in fact, to the subject of the film, namely the fate of the Afghan people in and out of Afghanistan, do you think that, in your own definition as a filmmaker, a fundamental change has occurred? That you are no longer really just a filmmaker? That the subject of the film has taken over, and, in effect, the reality of your art is driving you rather than you working on that reality?*

When I went to Herat to scout locations and saw those 20,000 people dying of hunger, and realized that all the films I had made could not prevent a single one of those people from dying, and when I see now that in my own neighbourhood, where I live, none of my films can prevent a single bomb from dropping on the head of these

godforsaken people, then sometimes I wonder—what is the point of making films? When I entered Afghanistan, it was as though somebody slapped me in the face and brought me to my senses. Just like the slap on the face of the US when those two buildings came down, about a year earlier that slap hit me in the face when I saw 20,000 people dying from hunger. I remember that the Iranian radio used to report every day that 'next year, some three million people are going to die from hunger in Afghanistan,' and then go straight on to the next item of news. Precisely for the same reason that the whole world is fixated on Afghanistan after September the Eleventh, I have to be granted the right to be totally preoccupied with Afghanistan after what I saw with my own eyes. You see, I was like an artist sitting at ease by the sea, trying to paint a picture of the sunset when, suddenly, I notice that someone is drowning. I plunge into the sea to save that person and then realize that on that spot there are many more who are also drowning. One by one, I start taking the drowning people out of the water to safety. When I'm tired out, I collapse on the shore, while the rest of the people are still drowning. Suddenly I come to my senses and remember sitting by the sea trying to paint a picture. So from the shore of filmmaking I plunged into the stormy sea of Afghanistan, and, right now, I am in the whirlpool of a human tragedy.

As you know, the majority of people in this world are not artists sitting, as you said in your own example, at ease by the sea trying to paint the sunset. Ordinary people have ordinary responsibilities, leading an ordinary life full of ordinary trappings. In your judgement, given the enormity of this catastrophe we are facing now, how could ordinary people lead a life that is limited to their daily duties and yet attentive to their responsibilities as human beings?

First of all, I believe that the world's attention will be fixated on Afghanistan only as long as the mass media so wishes. All we need is one month of the media forgetting about Afghanistan and so will the world. People are entirely conditioned by the media. Unless and until the media decides what is important, because the people lack independent judgement. Except, of course, the very few, the intellectuals, who do not place themselves under media bombardment. That's the first thing to keep in mind—that as soon as the media, especially the American media, forgets about something, so does the rest of the world. Right now, we are not witnessing much of a humanitarian anything. What we see is just spineless sympathy. That's all. I believe that certain practical ways will have to be devised to channel these positive sentiments that have been generated about Afghanistan to direct them towards changing the situation in that country. For

example, certain accounts can be opened with international humanitarian organizations earmarked for helping the Afghans, particularly for their education.

The intellectuals will have to struggle against violence, in whatever form and shape it comes. You see, this ordinary life you refer to is entirely contingent upon the launching of a single atomic bomb. One single dissatisfied mad scientist can one day blow the whole of humanity to kingdom come and all our ordinary lives will be brought to an abrupt end. We do not live in a world where performing our most ordinary duties as individuals, as parents, as friends, as employers, as employees, is separable from the fact of the atomic bomb. Sometimes, it appears that we are living out the very last seconds of human life on earth. So I believe that this attention to Afghanistan is, first and foremost, a fad, a fashion that will soon change; second, that world attention is fixated here only until the mass media so decides; third, that humanity at large is deeply in danger with so many atomic weapons sitting idle. If it is true that Bin Laden could sit in a cave in Afghanistan and send civilian airliners smashing into buildings in New York, then imagine what a mad scientist with his finger on the button of an atom bomb can do?

About two years ago, you remember, there was a conference held during the Cannes Film Festival 2000 about the future of cinema in the third millennium, in which your daughter Samira took part? One of the issues addressed in that gathering was the function of cinema in future, with particular reference to important changes in such technological innovations as the digital camera. After the events of September the Eleventh and October the Seventh, do you see a new function for cinema and for technology in the course of the third millennium, compared with your vision of the world before these events?

I think what September the Eleventh demonstrates is that if the mass media so decides, it can turn any issue into a global concern. Cinema, on the contrary, as an art, is an incomparably slower medium. If we put aside the exception of my *Kandahar* alerting the world's attention to this particular tragedy about a year before the global mass media did, ordinarily cinema turns to issues only after the mass media and the digital camera. Because we live in the age of speed, and the digital camera is an instrument of this age, and the media is contingent upon it, we ought to expect the birth of a new cinema within the mass media, hoping that it will stop looking at the world from a touristic and political angle. The only problem is that the speed of the digital camera and the expectation of speed in the mass media result in the fact that the images of humanity

now circulating through global satellites cannot penetrate the depth of the human soul and its tragedies—they remain limited to a superficial, political and touristic perception. The result is that we now witness a Hollywood story in which Bush, like Rambo, becomes the hero who saves his country, and Bin Laden is turned into the villain whose elimination will put an end to the predicament of Afghanistan. Whereas this human tragedy is rooted in the history and geography of the region, in poverty and ignorance, and the likes of Bin Laden are the fruits of the tree rooted in this desert. By cutting off this single fruit, one will not be immune to the others borne by this same cancerous tree. But the same digital camera can be put at the disposal of filmmakers who will produce alternative images, deeper in their perception of the human condition, so that with the same logic that cinema is after the discovery and expression of the soul of societies, television too might gradually replace superficial images and reach out to portray the soul of nations.

Last Wednesday evening, in New York, in front of no movie theatre did 2,000 people gather to see any film. But almost that many did gather and wait for hours in front of an auditorium on the Columbia University campus to see Kandahar. *When no more than 500 could be accommodated, the rest were disappointed and left extremely upset, just to return the following night and*

yet again stand in line and watch this film not in one but in two adjacent auditoriums. Would you consider this fact a hope that cinema can be the site of an art of resistance against the enormity of the mass media?

Yes. But the impact will have to be measured carefully in terms of the number of such audiences. The world we live in is almost entirely contingent upon its economics. Once Marx suggested that the economy is the principal factor, while the West, and even the Islamic societies, were screaming that no, culture is the principal factor. But, today, unfortunately, we see that the mass media is nothing but commercial propaganda. If a word of truth has no budget allocated to it, then that truth will not be spread. Now *Kandahar* is very popular. But nothing new has happened in this film. Even after September the Eleventh, my positions about Afghanistan have not changed. The attention to my film, I am afraid, stems from the fact that, right now, a kind of cinematic food is desired. But can this film stand a chance vis-à-vis the enormity of that media which covers about six billion people? Yes, it may be a kind of intellectual resistance on behalf of human truth and against business, politics, propaganda, power. But only at a level of not losing hope. *Kandahar* has not yet prevented the dropping of bombs. This film has not yet mobilized a force to solve the problem of hunger and

illiteracy in Afghanistan. All we can say is that the flame of this film is now fed by the deaths of millions of people in Afghanistan, of thousands in New York, and so turned into a brighter fire. But can this tiny flame, against so many lies, so much politics, so much business, have a light equivalent to the light that covers six billion people? Can it delay the destruction of our world by atomic power? The world that is afflicted by the catastrophe it has caused in the ozone layer, then by AIDS, by fundamentalism, by the atom bomb, the world that is every instant in danger of a stroke or a heart attack—can this world just take an intellectual aspirin to secure for itself an eternal life? Of course, I'm not entirely pessimistic. Because I believe that always from the heart of human catastrophes, from the depth of tragedies, flames of hope may emerge. The tragedy of New York is so important because when the United States, the most powerful nation on earth, appears so vulnerable, then how vulnerable is humanity at large, without access to so many instruments and technologies of power? Of course, you can look at it in another way: that places that have been turned into gargantuan factories of an arms industry are more in danger of explosion than deserts where no explosives are stored.

In your judgement, when filmmakers from around the globe gather in Cannes next May, will the events of September the

Eleventh and October the Seventh and afterwards have an enduring effect on the nature of world cinema, or will it be business as usual?

I think that Afghanistan and New York are really just two specific examples. We have to see which other countries are also forgotten, nations whose death may cause the death of humanity at large. Usually, we don't go to the doctor unless and until one of our organs is severely in pain. The attention of filmmakers will have to focus on the forgotten spots and subjects of humanity at large, not just Afghanistan. Afghanistan has now received its attention. But this attention will have to be deep and enduring, not just at the propaganda level or at the level of accusing of terrorism a whole nation of poor and illiterate people. But I don't think it will be totally useless either. Many of those reporters, who during the last Cannes Film Festival were telling me that a love story would have been more pleasing to them than the subject of my *Kandahar*, now tell me, 'Before September the Eleventh everyone was talking about everything except Afghanistan, while you were concerned with Afghanistan.' I tell them that my *Kandahar* was no prediction, that it was entirely coincidental that I ended up in Afghanistan. My making of the film took about a year, and had I not started a year earlier it would not have coincided with the current events. But

what I experienced first-hand, the rest of the world perceived from a distance. If we forget this event, it may well recur in some other part of the world and in an even worse manifestation, at which point there will be no sign left of any Cannes, or of those who go to Cannes . . .

THE PERIPATETIC FILMMAKER

Come to think of it, I have a hard time imagining Mohsen Makhmalbaf sitting still and/or resting. Most of my memories with him are of him in motion. The very first time I saw him, I remember, he was running—from Piazza Grande in Locarno towards the Press Court of Locarno International Film Festival. It was August 1996. Years later, my memories of him remain mobile memories. In mid-December 2005, on my way back to New York from a conference in Nicosia, Cyprus, on the thirteenth-century Persian mystic poet Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, I stopped in Paris for a few days to catch up with Mohsen Makhmalbaf. I had not seen him for over two years. It was in May 2003 that I had last seen him in Cannes, when his daughter Samira Makhmalbaf was premiering her third feature film, At Five in the Afternoon *(2003), and our mutual Afghan friend Sadiq Barmak was premiering his first,* Osama *(2003).*

A lot had happened over the last two years, both in our personal lives and in the world at large and we had much to catch up on.

While I was in Paris hanging out with Mohsen, staying at his apartment in the Montrouge suburb near Porte d'Orléans Métro station, we had plenty of chances yet again to talk at length, about various issues—the war in Iraq, for obvious reasons, was paramount on our minds, as was the continued carnage in Afghanistan, the collapse of the Reform Movement in Iran and so on. We found ourselves talking far more politics than cinema. We did go to see a film together in the Quartier Latin, but we left the movie theatre after about 10 minutes, went to a cafe and continued to talk politics. I did manage to watch all his own most recent films, which I had not seen, and a number of documentaries made about him and his family, as well as a number of short Afghan films (that he wanted me to see) and some Palestinian films (that I wanted him to see). He also read to me quite a few of his most recent scripts, waiting to be turned to films. But politics was what seemed to matter most—cinema was the subconscious of our politics in those memorable few days. 'Do you,' I remember I asked him at some point, 'see a connection between your early revolutionary activism and your measured political interventions these days—both in your films and in your efforts on behalf of Afghan children since the events of September the Eleventh, in particular?'

MOHSEN MAKHMALBAF: In a way yes and in a way no. I continue to be concerned about similar issues that have always concerned me, but I have long since categorically denounced violence. To me, violence is the source of our problem and cannot be its cure. So, you might say, I have dropped the weapon and picked up the camera. But the events in Iran are no longer the only issues that concern me. I do concentrate my efforts in Afghanistan, where I think they are most needed, but I have far more global concerns. These concerns at times lead to utter pessimism and despair—and yet pessimism is a luxury no one seems to afford these days.

HAMID DABASHI: *But you cannot say you are entirely indifferent to events in Iran, can you?*

Not really. Not at all. But events in Iran mostly anger me. You see, events of the late Pahlavi period and then the Islamic revolution were at the roots of my early cinema. But my cinema gradually departed from that premise and took in new sources of synergy with the world at large. So the events in Iran, particularly during the Reform Movement, began to have a renewed significance in my own thinking. But with the failure of that movement, I really have very limited and specific political objectives, of the sort that I can best perform in a place

like Afghanistan. Yes, I also make films in Afghanistan, but I have also built schools for children, trained young Afghan filmmakers and so on. It's the milieu one frequents in Iran that most bothers me—that of other artists, journalists, film critics and suchlike. Much censorship, particularly self-censorship, defines the limits of conversation. I would rather read or write a short story, a poem, maybe make a film, perhaps help build a school for children than be part of such futile gatherings.

Is that why you travel so much?

I actually don't travel too much. I used to, early in my career, but no longer. It tires me and wastes my time. I would rather travel to a location and scout for a new film. Festivals and press interviews tire and bore me. I have cut down a lot. I only do a bare minimum, to promote our family's films, and to stay tuned to what is happening in world cinema. Other than that, I'd rather go to India and get myself lost in the land that gave birth to Gandhi. I'd rather travel to Afghanistan and revisit the history of humanity. I like Afghanistan because it is simple, beautiful, and quite strange in that beauty and simplicity. I would rather come here to Paris and learn from the patience and poise of these people who can sit and be busy and happy with a cup of coffee and a book for a

whole day. I love the fact that here, in Paris, you can walk into any cinema you like and sit down and watch a world masterpiece in the humblest circumstances. Iranian cinema has a larger audience here in Paris than it does in Tehran. I have recently noted that when I am in Iran I talk too much, while when I'm in India, Afghanistan or France I look and listen more. I don't believe I will ever get to understand fully any one of these societies, but that inability in a strange way enables me. Visiting these and other countries makes me conscious of the relativity of the morals and principles and even tastes that I'm accustomed to. I thus discover an abstracted version of myself for which I then try to define certain inviolable principles. Many metaphysical questions arise in me—I in effect become metaphysical while I travel, suspended from an eternity of possibilities on this earth.

How much were you invested in Khatami's hopes? Was the Reform Movement of the late 1990s something akin to the early Islamic revolution? I remember you were quite excited about the movement when I came to Tehran in the summer of 1997, soon after the election of Mohammad Khatami—especially when you were making your Testing Democracy.

Yes I was—as much as I could be excited about politics at that point. My experiences from the late Pahlavi period,

particularly in prison, were in effect exorcized by my early cinema, particularly by films like *Boycott*. The Reform Movement could have been the next revolution, perhaps the revolution that people were hoping for in the first place. But I believe that what we are witnessing today is more than anything else the failure of political Islam, Islamism as a political ideology. The sooner we admit that failure, I think, the sooner we can think ahead and see where we stand in the world today in the aftermath of September the Eleventh and the carnage we now witness in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon.

Does cinema still appeal to you? Do you still have the same fascination with cinema that initially took you away from politics and towards film and fiction?

It certainly does. I was attracted to art and away from politics. In politics, I reached a dead end because I realized that violence is the cause of our troubles and cannot be their cure. There is also a hypocrisy in the realm of politics that deeply troubled me. I wanted to be part of a more universal attempt to at least address our problems rather than make them worse. Now when I turn to political matters, I do so, at least so far as I am concerned, from the heart of my art. And then there are times when I really can't tell the difference. There is ultimately a moral

position from which both our arts and politics must derive. Is *Kandahar* just a film or is it a political intervention? It was both when I was doing it, and it became a far more political statement in the aftermath of September the Eleventh—you remember when you screened it in New York soon after September the Eleventh? Also, I am still attracted to cinema—from cinema, I keep learning the fundamental principle of relativity, something I have also learned from my travels. Everywhere I go, I imagine myself a native of that land and wonder how radically different a person I would have been—in my most fundamental convictions—if I were a native of India, Japan or France. Cinema, in a sense, replicates that possibility, that sense of fictive wonder, where and when I can rethink myself.

But that is nothing new in your work—the relationship between politics and poetics, as it were, merging to make a third fusion unlike either of its components. There is, however, something else happening here too. In films such as A Moment of Innocence, Salaam Cinema *or* Once Upon a Time, Cinema, *you are as much concerned about cinema as an artistic product as you are with its being a creative process. This overtly conscious attention to the* medium *gives your cinema a political immediacy that is quite palpable. Do you think that, in being conscious of its own instrumentality, cinema has a social function to play?*

I agree with your assessment of the borderline between product and process, but I'm not sure if that reading of my cinema posits a social function for it as such. My own cinema has become less and less appealing to a mass audience inside Iran the more cinema has become a serious art form for me. The same is true about my social and moral concerns. The minute I turn to Afghanistan, Tajikistan or India, people inside Iran disconnect from my work—and yet these are works that are closest to my own heart as a filmmaker. So, perhaps, what we are witnessing is the formation of a different sort of audience for our work—at once more global and yet domestic to particular audiences outside Iran. The process you describe is more in the heart of my sort of filmmaking, where I have made occasional forays into discovering how this medium works. For me, these have been quite exciting occasions to get to know the nature of the art I practise. I do see your point about the political immediacy that this almost naked exposure of the medium gives to any art form. But I'm not sure whether that political immediacy translates for its audience. You see, our audiences have radically changed. They have become multiple. The *Kandahar* that is seen in Kabul is almost a different film from the *Kandahar* that is seen in Cannes or in New York.

That reminds me of the mirror metaphor that you've often used for cinema. That mirror seems to have multiple sides. It is more a speculum than a mirror. But even as a mirror, is cinema just a mirror that simply reflects what there is? In that case, what is the role of the filmmaker, the function of the artist in showing what that mirror reflects?

Well, it is the artist after all who decides the location of the mirror, right, its depth of field, as it were, its angle of reflection on reality and so on. In other words, I have never assumed a passive role for the artist when I have used this metaphor. My point rather has been to indicate a relation of reflexivity between where an artist is socially, politically and historically, and what his art shows. I have always been fascinated by the fact that every religion and every culture believes itself to be in possession of total truth, where it cannot have anything but a fragment of it, mixed up with all sorts of junk.

I assume one might also add the use of myth and poetry in the making of such grand narratives of total truth-telling—right? They also have a significant place in your cinema, such as, say, in Gabbeh *and* Silence, *where we see them as indications that reality is in effect artistically manipulated—*

Indeed—but manipulated in order to show its hidden meanings better. Where the mirror is, how close or far

from it you stand, what light you use, and so on—these are all visibly or invisibly present in what we see. In poetry, both verbal and visual, I have found an inroad towards truth that to me seems otherwise impossible to define or locate. But that poetry to me is not an abstraction. I see it more in everyday life than in old divans by dead poets. The same goes for mysticism, which to me is far more evident in the way Sohrab Sepehri saw the world than in volumes of bygone wisdom. It is this mediation of poetry towards reality that I have found revealing—or the way fiction facilitates facts.

This sounds a lot like Mr Sabzian, who pretended he was you, and Abbas Kiarostami's film Nema-ye Nazdik *(Close Up, 1990) which was based on that pretension.*

It was really bizarre, that Sabzian business. You know I had no interest in being photographed before this incident. But then not just Sabzian—many other people started pretending they were me! One of them actually got married while pretending he was me! My face became publicly recognizable soon after I decided to have a few photographs of me available in public to prevent these sorts of identity thefts. It is really pathetic, if you think of it. Filmmakers and filmmaking is so popular in Iran because all other forms of expression have been denied to people.

Then again, certain realities stay the same, no matter how we look at them, poetically or otherwise. Do you think we have changed much in our political culture since, say, the Constitutional Revolution early in the twentieth century?

Not really. Perhaps in very superficial ways, but not in any lasting sense. What bothers me most in this history is the consistent celebration of violence as a liberating and revolutionary act. I abhor that violence, which to me amounts to nothing more than generating more violence. Violence, and then oil, I think, are the two most important aspects of the calamity of our history. Oil has turned us into a lazy nation, a dependent nation, a non-productive people, a people accustomed to fate, chance, circumstances. We seem to feel entitled to certain things without ever working, struggling or deserving them.

What about artistic or creative agency in the midst of this predicament? How do you see the relationship between our politics and our arts? Do you think you are, for example, free to make any kind of film you want? Is there not a politics to financing in cinema?

Of course there is. But my kind of filmmaking and the sort of cinema that other members of my family make is too spontaneous to be controlled by any element, including its finances. As you well know, my films are made or

broken by the entirely unprofessional cast I happen to encounter in the course of making a film. I have a very generic notion of a character, which will not develop into a full-fledged persona until I've found a person to portray it. Then that person, his or her life story, begins to fuse into my character. This is true not just about, say, my own character in *A Moment of Innocence*, but also about figures such as the cyclist in *The Cyclist*, Nafas in *Kandahar* or the American doctor in *Kandahar* and so on. So the agency, as you call it, comes with the sense of restlessness that is behind the work of art, a certain nagging sense of not being satisfied with the status quo. If I as an artist am trapped in finances, then my agency is radically compromised. But the sort of financing I seek and the people I work with allow me that freedom of expression that enables me to follow my own sense of direction—moral, political and artistic. Precisely the same sets of factors have ultimately led me out of Iran and made me feel more at home in say Afghanistan, Tajikistan or India. I have developed this affection for countries like India or Afghanistan precisely because on these locations I feel I discover an aspect of my own character and work that would otherwise have been impossible for me to detect or discover.

What about your awareness of the global context of film production, and the markets that determine its reception? Do you think

your cinema can compete with the Western European and North American monopoly on circulating images?

Absolutely not. No single filmmaker or artist can. But I really don't have anything against that kind of cinema either. I don't believe one kind of cinema, say my sort of cinema, must be the only kind of cinema people do. From film festivals I have learned and internalized the art and craft of democracy: people, artists, with varied forms of ideas, practices, artistic sensibilities, coming together and showing each other their vision of reality. That is the beautiful part of our art.

But political events, such as the presence of Afghan refugees in Iran, had a radical impact on your cinema, right?

Of course. Look! I looked around and I discovered that, out of a population of 20 million, some six and a half million Afghans have been forced out of their homeland, about two and a half million have been killed or died of famine during the last 20 years—and that amounts to one person every five minutes. How, as a human being, could I remain indifferent to these facts?

Do you think your films on Afghanistan and on Afghans have had a political consequence?

Maybe yes, maybe no. I'm not quite sure. What I do know is that cinema is part of an industry. Integral to that

industry is a critical community that writes about films and their subject matter. I believe Afghanistan—or any other country for that matter—will be more in the news the more there are films about these countries.

I have heard and read you making sweeping condemnations of our culture as the root cause of our political stalemates. How do you distinguish between politics and culture: where does one end and the other begin?

By culture I mean the more enduring foregroundings of our convictions and behaviour. Our politics, say from the Pahlavi period to the Islamic Republic, are a variation on that theme. Remember all that enthusiasm and hope of the early revolution in 1977–79. You were not in Iran at the time—

Well, I came back for a short time during the summer of 1979—

Yes, I forgot. So, think back to the 'Spring of Freedom' as we used to call it. What happened to it? What happened to all those aspirations? So much betrayal, so much criminal theft of a people's hopes. But it isn't enough to mourn those failures. At some point, we need to reflect on the root cause of our troubles, troubles that keep pursuing us from one regime to another, one dynasty after another, one century after another. Constant in all these changes to me is the unfailing centrality of violence. But

violence breeds more violence. That is the reason I am so entirely mesmerized by what Gandhi stood for and what Gandhi achieved.

But Gandhi himself ended with violence, the violence of a Hindu assassin.

All the more an evidence of the superiority of his wisdom.

Speaking of violence, will you ever consider making a Hollywood film?

Why would I want to do that? The heart of art is simplicity. I want to make ever more simple films, films that strip reality of all its superficial baggage. Why would I want to reach for even more cumbersome layers of unreality on top of what I'm trying to see and expose? It wouldn't make sense, would it? But as I said, I am not against Hollywood either. They do what they do and I do what I do.

People are fascinated by the fact that no two films of yours look alike. How do you see that fact yourself?

Usually it is the subject of the film I'm making that creates its own visual look. So in the span of, say, two years, I would make *A Moment of Innocence*, *Salaam Cinema* and *Gabbeh*, and, as you see, they all look different from each other. I always like to say that usually people categorize

filmmakers. I categorize people. As soon as they tell me which one of my films they like, I can tell what sort of a person they are. Which one of my films do *you* like?

I won't tell you. I like them all.

No. That is a cop-out!

In doing what you do, what prompts significant changes in the course of your cinema? Were you, for example, making a conscious decision in changing the direction of your cinema while you were making Gabbeh? *The shift from an urban milieu, for example, your attention to the countryside, your use of fairy tale and myth, the introduction of surreal moments in your narratives, the excessive use of light and colour, in particular. Was that film a turning point for you?*

In my own mind, I was moving away from social realism and towards a poetic simplicity. This happened in the course of my making *Gabbeh*. More and more, I sought to do what I wanted to do in a more simple and naked manner. Isn't that what you call 'virtual realism' in my cinema?

Yes it is.

In my own manner of seeing it, I consider it a more simple, and thus perhaps poetic, way of seeing things. But in *Gabbeh*, perhaps more than in other places, I discover the

terms of my own visuality, the way I could see and show things visually, with a minimum to non-existent need for dialogue. In a way, the visual story of *Gabbeh* runs ahead of its own tale.

Going back to the question of violence, both A Moment of Innocence *and* Gabbeh *share a mutual questioning of violence as a means of achieving ends, any ends, no matter how just and noble. They focus on the theme of love and forgiveness. Do you see the connection?*

Perhaps. I'm not sure. In my own mind, they bring my cinema to a poetic conclusion, something that perhaps I have always been after, even if I didn't quite know it.

How do you see the link between that poetic conclusion and what has happened to your cinema since you made Kandahar? *Much has happened since you made* Kandahar. *Afghanistan was invaded and is still under effective occupation. Iraq was invaded and is now ravaged. The Taliban have returned to Afghanistan, and Afghan opium production is on the rise. The US may heap folly upon folly and invade Iran. Militant acts of senseless violence confound imperial arrogance. Meanwhile, the spread of neoliberal economics and neoconservative politics is moving from the US to Europe. What, do you think, is the role of a committed filmmaker in a time like this? Does cinema have any role in resisting the onslaught of predatory capitalism, blind faith and*

authoritarian violence? Or is it possible that cinema is part of the problem?

Cinema, the best that is in cinema, is not the problem, but perhaps a manner of pointing towards it. Even Hollywood is now critical of Bush's policies. To me, what is happening in the world is simply a spiralling of violence, violence breeding more violence, violence getting out of hand. Between Bush and Bin Laden, and what these two names stand for, there seems to be a dialogue of violence, one outdoing the other, with innocent people caught in between. What can cinema do in this mayhem? Nothing substantial really, particularly the way it is caught in its own web of festivals, producers, distributors, directors, actors, professionals, critics, and so on. But what can we do—except keep our noses to the grindstone and hope for the best?